Slaving, Colonial Diplomacy, and Resource Extraction in Seventeenth-Century Maritime Asia

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Abstract

This study combines perspectives of social change and resource exploitation from two angles: the intercultural diplomacy conducted by the VOC in early modern maritime Asia, and the trajectories of slavery, slave routes, and zones of coerced labour in this macro-region. The use of enslaved people by European polities for production of cash crops and domestic work in maritime South and Southeast Asia has been widely researched. The local consequences of the widespread slaving need however to be better understood, not least in terms of the exploitation of natural resources and their entanglement with social change in the affected areas. The article discusses how early colonial diplomacy and treatymaking with indigenous societies in the period 1600-1700 had a role in shaping slave circuits while impacting on local economic systems. A combination of slaving and extraction of commercial items of 'luxury' type is often found in the diplomatic instruments. The study highlights the possibilities of Dutch contracts and agreements to trace historical processes in combination with other types of sources. By looking at negotiating practices, we can better understand the structures of geographical distribution of slaving activities, trading practices, forced deliveries of manpower, and resistance to enslavement. In sum, the consequences of enforced movement of people in the contact zones between colonial and indigenous groups.

INTRODUCTION

> *The rajas, according to decree, shall push their subjects to collect a good requisition of turtle shell in the west monsoon and, after collecting it, bring to the Resident without siphoning anything, for the optimal service of the Noble Company.*
>
> *The rajas or inhabitants shall keep the slaves that were traded by the Resident Hendrik Bijlaagh under their protection so they do not escape until our yachts or small vessels can bring them off, and bring them aboard without any fraud so that there will be no loss for the Noble Company.*[1]

These paragraphs, culled from a contract from 1648 between the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the small Indonesian island Savu, provide a brief glimpse of the intersection between colonial diplomacy, slavery, and ecologic imprint in the era of European overseas expansion. As an accompanying diary specifies, the humans referred to as slaves were caught among the people of the hilly interior, since the rajas at the coast dispatched foot soldiers as well as horsemen to gather human harvests.[2] The enslaved were destined for Kupang in West Timor where some of them would perform work for the Company post that was busy exploiting sandalwood and beeswax from the region.[3] This was combined with the killing of sea turtles of the Savu Sea, with the predictable result that these became increasingly rare.[4] Both paragraphs anxiously stress the maximization of Company profit. The example suggests the role slavery might take in European-Asian contract making, and how this went hand in hand with resource extraction in societies vulnerable to colonial influences. The present article discusses this intersection during the first century of Dutch expansion in the Indian Ocean World.

Historical and anthropological research about slavery and coerced labour in the Indian Ocean World, pioneered by the works of James Warren and Anthony Reid, has

[1] Contractenboek 1616-1759, 1aE, Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta, Indonesia.
[2] P.A. Tiele and J.E. Heeres (eds.), *Bouwstoffen voor de geschiedenis der Nederlanders in den Maleischen Archipel* ('s-Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1886-1895), III, 24.
[3] Hans Hägerdal, *Lords of the Land, Lords of the Sea: Conflict and adaptation in early colonial Timor 1600-1800* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2012), 275-6.
[4] Geneviève Duggan and Hans Hägerdal, *Savu: History and oral tradition on an island of Indonesia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018), 135.

expanded greatly in the 2000s.[5] Recent interventions have resolutely moved away from the 'curse of the Atlantic,' that is, the previous tendency to use the slave traffic from Africa to the Americas as a template to assess slaving on a global level.[6] Definitions of slavery as a concept need rethinking since indigenous modes of labour exploitation in the Indian Ocean World did not conform to Atlantic conceptions. Slavery tended to be more household-oriented and less racialized than in the Atlantic World, though there were also labour-intensive forms. Thus, there is no 'given' system of slavery, but rather a social process that has arisen out of a multitude of contexts and taken many forms.[7] It was not uncommon to find several categories of people in a permanent state of personal dependence and tied to coerced work tasks in one and the same region. Some scholars of the region make a clear distinction between precolonial and colonial slavery, but we also find hybrid forms in the contact zones dominated by European organizations, such as the VOC.[8]

Also, an accumulating body of data shows that enslavement in the Indian Ocean and Asia was more widespread and prevalent than previously assumed. Raiding and warfare had a part in this, but the substantial slave populations can also be tied to geographical macro-processes. An edited volume by Gwyn Campbell has demonstrated how the natural environment and environmental changes have interacted with slavery, bondage, and coerced labour in the Indian Ocean World. Especially, the monsoon pattern imprinted the macro-region and made for an interlocking complex of slaving circuits. Natural disasters, famines, and climatic fluctuations drove humans into bonded labour relations.[9]

From another angle, one may ask how slaving and resource extraction operated side by side in a given context. The present article discusses treaties as revealing documents illustrating the VOC's entanglement in slavery and the trade in exotic goods, and some of

[5] James Francis Warren, *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898: The dynamics of external trade, slavery, and ethnicity in the transformation of a Southeast Asian maritime state* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007); Anthony Reid (ed.), *Slavery, Bondage and Dependence in Southeast Asia* (New York: University of Queensland Press, 1983).
[6] Richard B. Allen, *Slave, Convict, and Indentured Labor, and the Tyranny of the Particular* (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2020), 1-17.
[7] Richard B. Allen, "Slavery, slave trading, and bonded labor studies in Asia," in *Slavery and Bonded Labor in Asia, 1250-1900*, ed. Richard B. Allen (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 13-28; Suzanne Miers, "Slavery: A question of definition," in *The Structure of Slavery in India Ocean Africa and Asia*, ed. Gwyn Campbell (London: Frank Cass, 2004), 1, 11; Joseph C. Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A global approach* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2012), 158-62.
[8] Kate Ekama, "Boundaries of bondage: Slavery and enslaveability in VOC Ceylon," in *Slavery and Bondage in Asia, 1550-1850: Towards a global history of coerced labour*, ed. Kate Ekama, Lisa Hellman, and Matthias van Rossum (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 121-2.
[9] Gwyn Campbell (ed.), *Bondage and the Environment in the Indian Ocean World* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

its consequences for local habitats. The treaties hint at the social, religious, and gendered profiles of slave populations and shed light on which groups were desired and under what circumstances could they be acquired and traded (their enslaveability). Seen in context, the treaties highlight connectedness between colonial and local slaving, and the changes that this connection brought about. Finally, such developments provoked forms of resistance and agency among the enslaved, or among groups afflicted by slaving. An interesting task is therefore to find traces of European anxiety in the diplomatic records, since it may highlight the social hierarchies of the colonial contact zones, and the perceived precariousness of the European presence.

By extension, this paints a complicated picture of interlocking, VOC-driven exploitation of man and nature that adjusted existing economic patterns and flows. Treaty-making as an expression of imperial expansion and intercultural diplomacy is juxtaposed with the trajectories of slavery, slave routes, and zones of coerced labour in maritime Asia.[10] The investigation focuses on the contracts and agreements made between the VOC and its counterparts in the Indian Ocean World during the period 1602-1700. The reason for the choice of time-period and protagonist is that the VOC was the main European player in the region during the seventeenth century and concluded a huge number of treaties.

TREATYMAKING AND SLAVE LABOUR IN THE WORLD OF THE VOC

The evolving diplomatic apparatus of the VOC needs further comment. Treaties and treaty-making shaped local political realities, inter-cultural relations, and imperialism in maritime Asia during the period conventionally known as the early-modern. Due to the geopolitical context, parts of Asia saw an increasing interaction between overseas powers and indigenous states. Especially with the establishment of the VOC in 1602, a fine-tuned diplomatic network was formed. The increasing efforts to create commercial monopolies through diplomacy can itself be linked to climatic changes. Such strategies were dependent on macro factors such as monsoon patterns, currents, coastlines, food resources, preconditions for habitation, and so on. The global climatic downturn in c. 1640-1700 affected maritime Southeast Asia where the VOC based its power: with climatic and other strains, demands for Southeast Asian exports in Europe, China and Japan declined. Difficult commercial circumstances thus pushed the VOC to enforce monopolies on a various luxury goods, which was enabled by the relatively vulnerable

[10] Allen, "Slavery, slave trading, and bonded labor studies in Asia," 1-29.

polities in the region.[11] Although a shareholding company, it therefore soon took on the characteristics of a political player.[12] The Company authorities in Asia acquired rights to start wars, conclude peace treaties, and engage in diplomatic negotiations in general. The board that oversaw Company affairs in the Netherlands, the Seventeen Gentlemen, had no possibility to take a similar role 'on the ground,' since the sea journey to Asian lands took six months or more. Rather, the Governor-General and his council in Batavia, known as the Supreme Government, had extensive executive powers.[13] Even so, the long lines of communication meant that the negotiating power was delegated to headmen of the various posts, from the Cape to Taiwan. The English East India Company (EIC) and the Iberian powers were also active in Asian affairs, as were French and Danish merchants, but were less prominent as diplomatic players during the seventeenth century.

To maintain stable sea routes and economic activities, Europeans thus needed a set of agreements and contracts. Although Asian powers also took initiatives, the Western input has had lasting consequences.[14] Europeans would consider treaties as perpetual, which was not always the understanding of the Asian part; for example, the corresponding Malay word *janji* covers a much wider spectrum than a treaty, and Islamic law disapproved of perpetual treaties with non-Muslims.[15] Treaty-making between Europeans and non-Europeans in the early modern era was nevertheless, according to current scholarly consensus, important for the development of international law; an insight that moreover discards traditional ideas that international law had its roots in Europe itself.[16] The historical treaties are relevant for many lasting issues of social, economic and political importance, for example pertaining to sovereignty, national and regional land borders, maritime disputes, land ownership, control over natural resources and the situation of indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities around the world.

A look at the (incomplete) Dutch collection *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlando-Indicum* reveals almost two thousand contracts and agreements with Asia, from major

[11] Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in global context, c.800-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003-2009), II, 864.
[12] There is currently a major scholarly debate on whether the Company evolved into a political entity with state characteristics or remained a basically commerce-driven organization. See: Arthur Weststeijn, "The VOC as a company-state: Debating seventeenth-century Dutch colonial expansion," *Itinerario* 38, 1 (2014), 13-34.
[13] C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600-1800* (London: Penguin, 1990), 211-2.
[14] Gerrit Knaap and Ger Teitler (eds.), *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002).
[15] Peter Borschberg, "Treaties in Asia," in *Handbuch Frieden im Europa der Frühen Neuzeit / Handbook of Peace in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Irene Dingel, Michael Rohrschneider, Inken Schmidt-Voges, Siegrid Westphal, and Joachim Whaley (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 407-10.
[16] Stefan Eklöf Amirell, "International treaties: The foundations of colonial rule in Southeast Asia," *IIAS Newsletter*, 95 (2023), 18.

kingdoms such as Siam and Persia down to polities on the village level in minor islands like Nias and Ambon.[17] A categorization and exemplification of these elucidates the relation between the micro level of local treaty making and the macro level of diplomacy as an instrument of imperialism and a driver of globalisation. Particular cases reveal historical processes on a higher aggregate level that cannot be established solely from a macro perspective.[18] Studying a sample of individual treaties may also elucidate intercultural processes. The vocabulary and themes of the various treaties are often steeped in a standard mould and show that the Dutch developed a set of routines with a foundation in European legal tradition. As pointed out by recent research, Europeans did not intend the treaties to be equal, but rather aimed to secure political obedience and resource extraction.[19] However, the individual treaties were also reflective of the capabilities and culture of the Asian counterpart. They were more reciprocal than the situation in the late colonial era, in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

These treaties have relevance for the acquisition and allocation of enslaved labour. While slavery does not figure very prominently in the standard works about the VOC, the English East India Company, and the Spanish and Portuguese establishments, the primary sources tell another story. Dutch economic interest in the region in the early-modern period was mostly centred on luxury products rather than bulk goods.[20] The quest for spices and forest products led the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, and English to establish posts at places where these items were produced, such as Sri Lanka, Sumatra, Maluku, and the Timor Islands. Their activities demanded a steady supply of manpower that local populations were often unable or unwilling to provide. From the founding of Batavia, the VOC desperately looked for labour to maintain their establishments. Labour was expensive in Southeast Asia, and slavery was the answer. To use Javanese and Malays was considered risky, and slaves were therefore sought elsewhere. Arakan was an important provider for much of the seventeenth century but was a problematic source. The Makassar War in 1667-1669 provided new sources for slaving and expanded the VOC's influence in eastern Indonesia. Disengaging from Arakan after 1669, the Dutch built up

[17] J.E. Heeres and F.W. Stapel (eds.), *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlando-Indicum* ('s-Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff, 1907-1955), I-VI.
[18] Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, "The singularization of history: Social history and microhistory within the postmodern state of knowledge," *Journal of Social History*, 36, 3 (2003), 709-12.
[19] Martine van Ittersum, "Empire by treaty? The role of written documents in European overseas expansion, 1500-1800," in *The Dutch and English East India Companies: Diplomacy, trade and violence in early modern Asia*, eds. Adam Clulow and Tristan Mostert (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 156-61.
[20] Pieter C. Emmer and Jos J.L. Gommans, *The Dutch Overseas Empire 1600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 32.

slave trading relations with micro polities in eastern Indonesia.[21] This was reinforced after 1689, as the Company discouraged the purchase of slaves from Java, Makassar, Buton, and Bali, although the directives had limited effect.[22]

In the early days of Dutch Republic, many a spokesman found the slave trade detestable, but practical considerations soon won the day.[23] Thus, trade in enslaved people became important as a corollary of colonial processes, in the Atlantic as well as the Indian Ocean World. For the VOC, this included the purchase of coerced labour for plantations (especially the Banda Islands), as an urban working force (such as in Batavia, Melaka, and Ambon), and for export to faraway places within their commercial sphere (such as manpower from South Asia going to various places in Southeast Asia). According to recent estimates, somewhere between 660,000 and 1,135,000 slaves were imported to VOC settlements in 1602-1799.[24] Moreover, local slaving could thrive under European protection, as the VOC gained a hegemonic if contested role in large swathes of maritime Southeast Asia in the course of the seventeenth century.[25] The island world was marked by ethno-linguistic fragmentation, religious diversity, extremely uneven population density, and great variations in political integration, from extensive sultanates to autonomous villages. In this volatile landscape, insecure conditions and slave raiding were common, especially in stateless areas outside of or nominally subservient to European powers.

When we inquire how this was regulated by diplomatic efforts, we must note the problems of terminology. While the treaties take the term slave as a 'given,' their status in an Asian setting is murky: they can correspond to a wide range of heavily bonded manpower that vary with the social and economic system. In the context of this article, I define slavery as the juridical or customary possession over human bodies, usually on a permanent basis and intended for coerced labour, but stress that it is not a system but rather processes coming out of a multitude of contexts.[26]

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[21] Samantha Sint Nicolaas, "Maritime (im)mobility: Reconstructing the supply of enslaved labour to Batavia, 1624–1801," *Slavery and Bondage in Asia, 1550-1850: Towards a Global History of Coerced Labour*, eds. Kate Ekama, Lisa Hellman, and Matthias van Rossum (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 54, 59-60, 63-4, 67-71.
[22] W.Ph. Coolhaas (ed.), *Generale missiven van Gouverneurs-general en raden aan Heren VII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1971), VII, 298, 300.
[23] P.C. Emmer, *The Dutch Slave Trade 1500-1850* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006), 13-6.
[24] Matthias van Rossum, "Towards a global perspective on early modern slave trade: Prices of the enslaved in the Indian Ocean, Indonesian Archipelago and Atlantic Worlds," *Journal of Social History*, 17, 1 (2021), 50.
[25] Emmer and Gommans, *The Dutch Overseas Empire 1600-1800*, 254-89.
[26] Miller, *The Problem of Slavery*.

THE DIPLOMATIC CORPUS

From its inception in 1602, the VOC developed a comprehensive network of diplomatic contacts. The innumerable contracts and agreements were concluded with polities of any size, from the huge Mughal Empire to the tiny villages of the Malukan islands. The contracts are mostly preserved in Dutch versions only, although bilingual and even trilingual versions are known to be in existence.[27] However, for practical purposes it has only been possible to consult the texts in Dutch in the present study. The investigation uses the above-mentioned *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlando-Indicum*, more specifically the first four out of six volumes. Through data sampling of the digitized versions found at the Corts Foundation website, the present writer identified all passages from 1602-1700 that mention (male) slaves (*slaven*), female slaves (*slavinnen*), and a gender-neutral term that literally means serfs (*lijfeigenen*).[28]

That slaves loomed large in early modern colonial relations is clearly seen by the sheer number of treaties that refer to them, a total of 114 treaties in the course of the century. The relevant ones are mostly but not exclusively from Southeast Asia – as is well known, the VOC maintained trading posts from Cape Town to East Asia and held a Dutch monopoly on trade in this vast region, but tended to cluster in present-day Indonesia and the Malay Peninsula. Still, this is a minor part of the total number of printed treaties and agreements up to 1700, which run to 612 (including the pre-VOC trading companies before 1602). The total number up to the end of the Company in 1799 is 1198. Some treaties preserved in archival collections and seen by the present author are not included in the *Corpus* collection, including the Savu contract quoted at the beginning of this article. For practical purposes they have not been included in the statistics for this study.[29] This being said, the general patterns of Dutch-versus-indigenous diplomacy should be visible from the printed treaties. The references to enslaved labour will be exemplified by several cases that highlight how the slave paragraphs (paragraphs in the treaties that refer to slaves) relate to habitation, resource extraction, and geographical preconditions.

The counterparts of the VOC in the corpus belonged to a wide range of political systems. The rulers of Arakan and the Mughal Empire were, of course, perfectly independent and could dictate conditions of slave trade, sometimes to the detriment of the Company. Others were autonomous, mostly Muslim rulers of archipelagic realms; these

[27] The latter merits a future study, not least for the way concepts such as 'slave' are rendered in Asian-language versions.
[28] The Corts Foundation, "Digiheek": https://www.cortsfoundation.org/nl/digitheek [Accessed: 15 Jan. 2024]
[29] The collection of unpublished treaties from multiple archives is part of an ongoing project, *Historical treaties of Southeast Asia*. See: https://sea-treaties.org/ [Accessed: 24 Jan. 2024].

were often dependent on inter-regional trade and came increasingly under the influence of the VOC during the century. Still other counterparts were non-royal village chiefs or headmen, including those of East Indonesia, Nias, and (in one case) the Khoisan of South Africa. The latter category would have been especially vulnerable and hardly able to withstand military demonstrations, but also lived in environments where withdrawal to rainforests or mountains was often possible, meaning that the VOC had to take some care in negotiations. Nearly all these societies had their own traditions of coerced labour, based on caste, raiding, warfare, legal sentences, and debt. There hardly seem to have existed theoretical concepts of human equality, although religious factors played a role in terms of enslaveability.[30]

HUMANS AS PAYMENT OF FINES

What were the contents of the slave paragraphs? What reasons does the corpus reveal to include enslaved people in binding inter-polity treaties? If we break down the corpus according to the stated aims of the slave paragraphs, we come to the following statistics (see Table 1).

Restitution of fugitive slaves	72
Regulation of slave trade	31
Slaves as fines or tribute	9
Turning somebody into a slave	5
Prohibition against slaving	2
Stipulation of tolls for slave trade	1

Table 1. Aims of the slave paragraphs in the contacts and agreements of 1600-1700.[31]

We may first inquire about the value of slaves as a commodity due to the relative scarceness of labour. Some of this can be seen from treaties that stipulate payment by the indigenous part due to conflicts. As evident from Table 1, nine contracts speak of slaves as either fine or tribute to the VOC. Although relatively few, they could be significant. The most blatant example is the well-known Bungaya treaty in 1667 that was forced upon the Makassar Empire after a severe defeat at the hands of the VOC and Bone. Apart from

[30] Anthony Reid, "Introduction," *in Slavery, Bondage and Dependence*, ed. Reid, 1-37.
[31] The sum of the figures is higher than the number of relevant contracts (114), since one contract could have more than one aim.

ridding the empire of its far-flung dependencies, the treaty also stipulated that the Makassar rulers must yield 1,000 slaves for allegedly breaking the peace. This veritable army of slaves had to be delivered by the next season and had to consist of 'young, healthy and adult' items, male and female. In case of lack of available slaves, they might have be substituted for cannons, gold, or silver.[32] Together with the huge losses of life in the Dutch-Makassar warfare and the following conflicts in Sulawesi, we see a demographic disruption that created a terrible social and economic situation and led to large seaborne migration over vast areas, from Aceh to Papua.[33] These migrations by South Sulawesi groups in turn had a number of political, social, and economic consequences that included slaving, resource extraction, and anti-European activities – in other words, a dispersion effect set in motion by Dutch cupidity, that in the end hit back at the Dutch interests.[34]

In another case, the VOC forced a sort of 'lease' of slaves. Naning and Rembau, two districts close to Malacca and now parts of Negeri Sembilan, had turned recalcitrant and were, when peace was restored in 1680, ordered to deliver 30 slaves to work in Malacca for ten years on the same conditions as the Company-owned slaves. The term *slaven* implies that male slaves were demanded for the probably heavy work at the Dutch port city. If a slave died during the term, the indigenous owner did not receive compensation, but if they survived their ten years they were handed back to the owners or their heirs.[35] The clause provides an interesting example of how early colonial exploitation could work in practice, where enslaved labour was important as items of retribution.

Regulating Acquisition of Enslaved Labour

Next, we address the acquisition of coerced labour, and the changes it brought about for the human environment, here defined as an area (such as a settlement with hinterland) where humans are engaged in a range of socioeconomic activities and resource use. Here, the material reveals how the geographical, social, or cultural preconditions favoured enslavement in particular regions. This is set out in Table 2, which shows the number of treaties mentioning slaves in relation to the number in total, region by region.

[32] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, II, 375.
[33] Kathryn Anderson Wellen, *The Open Door: Early modern Wajorese statecraft and diaspora* (De Kalb: NIU Press, 2014), 30-8.
[34] Hans Hägerdal, "The Bugis-Makassar seafarers: Pirates or entrepreneurs?," in *Piracy in World History*, eds. Stefan Eklöf Amirell, Bruce Buchan, and Hans Hägerdal (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), 109-28
[35] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, III, 204.

Region	Paragraphs that Mention Slaves	Treaties in all	Quota
Eastern Indonesia	55	145	38%
Sumatra	22	79	28%
South India-Ceylon	16	206	8%
Java	6	33	18%
Malay Peninsula	3	16	19%
Mughal Empire	3	32	9%
Arakan	2	2	100%
S. Africa and islands	2	7	28%
Taiwan-China	2	7	28%
Borneo	1	4	25%
Arab-speaking lands	1	2	50%
Persia	1	44	2%

Table 2. Treaties with slave paragraphs, region by region.

Of the treaties concerned with slaves, about half (55) are from eastern Indonesia, defined as the islands east of Bali including Sulawesi and East Timor.[36] Moreover, the quota of these treaties in relation to the overall number of the East Indonesian region is much higher than for the other significant posts. As for the other regions, Sumatra also has a relatively substantial quota, while those for South Asia (Mughal Empire and South India-Ceylon) are comparatively low. That these figures do not quite represent the slaving that took place in the Indian Ocean World is obvious. Most conspicuously, Bali is entirely absent from the picture, although reasonable estimates put the number of exported Balinese slaves from 1620-1830 at 100,000-150,000.[37] The explanation is that the Balinese elite avoided written contracts with Western powers until far into the nineteenth century, while the slave trade was conducted by the Dutch on less formalized basis. As for South Asia, Markus Vink has pointed out that it remained the VOC's major source of enslaved people up to the 1660s, but not after that.[38] In fact, only four slave-related treaties

[36] In this context, Indonesia is therefore used in a non-political sense. As well known, the term was only coined in the mid-nineteenth century.
[37] Markus Vink, "'The world's oldest trade': Dutch slavery and slave trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of World History*, 14, 2 (2003), 144; Henk Schulte Nordholt, *The Spell of Power: A history of Balinese politics 1650-1940* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1996), 41.
[38] Vink, "'The World's Oldest Trade'," 140.

or agreements out of nineteen were concluded after 1665 with the Mughal Empire, South India, and Ceylon. The medium-ranged quotas for Sumatra, the Malay Peninsula and Java are, perhaps, what could be expected; all three regions had deep intercourse with the VOC, although the Islamized parts were unlikely to yield local-born slaves to European buyers. The Southeast Asian mainland is merely represented by a couple of contracts with Arakan, a well-known site of the slave trade, although coerced labour is otherwise known to have been widespread in Siam, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Overall, it should be recalled that there were important slaving circuits outside the influence of the VOC, such as the Sulu Zone, Aceh, and the Portuguese sphere in Flores and Timor.[39]

Eastern Indonesia thus stands out as a macro-region where slavery loomed large in diplomatic relations. Interestingly, large sections of this territory held limited economic interest for the VOC. The main exceptions were certain minor islands of Maluku that produced nutmeg, mace and cloves, items that famously caused deadly rivalry between European powers and brought extensive colonial warfare up to the 1650s.[40] When we survey the East Indonesian treaties, it is apparent that they were often concluded with miniscule polities from which little or no profit could be expected. Islands like Damar, Kisar and Solor might have had products that were useful for the Dutch, such as sulphur, beeswax, and whale-oil, but this did not make up for the costs of keeping fortresses. Sometimes the counterparts were not conventional polities at all, but rather village clusters or a coastal site with hinterland. The generally fragmented political landscape of the eastern part of the archipelago made it necessary to approach the islands step by step to keep rivals away, who might disturb the appropriation of the spices in Maluku and sandalwood in Timor, and for that matter, access to slave labour.[41]

As a micro case of this enslavement contest, a contract with some chiefs in the Tanimbar Islands in 1646 specifically mentions seafarers from Makassar and native fugitives from Dutch-colonized Banda who used the rhythm of the monsoon pattern to go to the south side of the main island at the end of March, shortly before the monsoon shift that would enable their return. The contract includes a paragraph that specifically mentions slave trade:

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[39] Warren, *The Sulu Zone*; Denys Lombard, *Le sultanat d'Atjeh au temps d'Iskandar Muda 1607-1636* (Paris: EFEO, 1967), 58-9, 94; Hägerdal, *Lords of the Land*, 148, 163, 168-9.

[40] Tristan Mostert, "Spice war: Ternate, Makassar, the Dutch East India Company and the struggle for the Ambon Islands (c. 1600-1656)" (Unpublished PhD diss., Leiden University, 2023). Maluku is used in the modern geographical sense, that is, the provinces of Maluku and North Maluku.

[41] Heather Sutherland, *Seaways and Gatekeepers: Trade and state in the eastern Archipelagos of Southeast Asia, c.1600-c.1906* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2021), 182-207.

> We promise in the aforementioned manner, generally and individually, that we the inhabitants of all these islands, shall not sell, trade, barter or align any slaves, amber, turtle-shell, manta skins, red and yellow dye, or black ebony or other merchandise, to anyone in the world who might be there, directly or indirectly, under any guise, except to the upper merchant, under merchants or assistants…[42]

While terse, the contract provides some information about historical processes in the area. Slaves are mentioned first, before 'exotic' luxury products such as amber and manta skins, suggesting a previous trade with Muslim seafarers from Sulawesi and Maluku. Unfortunately, the indigenous term for slave is not mentioned, but other data suggests that the small-scale societies of southern Maluku, in spite of being stateless, were hierarchical with defined categories of elite, commoners and 'slaves' or 'serfs.' By the nineteenth century, Tanimbarese slaves or *uria* consisted of people originating from other islands in the region, or those who were unable to pay debts or fines.[43] But the passage also hints at how the VOC was altering economy and environment in the larger region. The Company officials were very clear that the monopolies had to be enforced even in the little-known waters to the south and east of Banda.[44] By forbidding the Tanimbarese and other Malukan peoples to trade with other than the Dutch, who would anyway be rare visitors for logistic reasons, the VOC stymied inter-island exchange and favoured a way of life that the Europeans much later would call 'traditional' – even if VOC control slackened by and by.

The enslaved people brought out from Tanimbar went to Banda in the first place, where they worked on the nutmeg plantations. Proto-demographic data from Banda in the seventeenth century shows that lots of mainly female slaves from the southern island groups of Maluku (Tanimbar, Kei, Aru), and from Papua and Timor, were used to maintain the plantations – as common in the history of slave raiding, females were more likely to survive than men.[45] All this impacted on the natural environment in Maluku. As the Dutch were concentrating spice production to the Banda and Ambon Islands, they not only changed settlement patterns and vegetation there, but also waged formidable wars on

[42] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, I, 466.
[43] J.G.F. Riedel, *De sluik en kroesharige rassen tusschen Selebes en Papua* ('s Gravenhage, Martinus Nijhoff, 1886), 293.
[44] J.E. Heeres, "Documenten betreffende de ontdekkingstochten van Adriaan Dortsman beoosten en bezuiden Banda, op last van Antonio Van Diemen en Cornelis Van der Lijn ondernomen in 1645 en 1646," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 46, 1 (1896), 609.
[45] Enumeration of plantations and slaves, Banda, 1699, f. 81-120, VOC 1622, Nationaal Archief, The Hague (hereafter: NA).

both humans and trees in other islands as they eradicated clove and nutmeg trees to ensure spice monopoly. This combined with forced population movements that left areas such as westernmost Seram an uninhabited wilderness. Thus, the treaties with minor island societies, and their slave paragraphs, were parts of a larger mercantilist apparatus where the Malukan spice production in the end gave the VOC some 15 percent of its incomes in the Netherlands.[46]

The high economic stakes on an inter-regional level help explain the high incidence of slave clauses in the diplomatic instruments of eastern Indonesia, but one must also bear in mind that a combination of political and cultural factors favoured enslavement in this region. Many populations of the east were still neither Muslims or Christians and therefore were considered as permissible objects of slaving (although members of these creeds were also sometimes enslaved, even by their coreligionists).[47] The complicated map of mostly small and segmentary polities led to unstable conditions where raiding was common. A quote from the report of the Dutch expedition to Tanimbar in 1646 captures the perils of local slave raiding for the human environment (the area of human settlement and economic activity), when the VOC representatives visited the small island Sera:

> Mr. Dortsman asked why their women and children and some of the men had fled with their goods, and where they had gone. They replied that the most of them had fled to Tanimbar and Larat since the people of Maetwijck, a region in Timorlaut where three settlements are situated, came to fight them daily, and rob them of their women, children and goods, so that agriculture as well as the capture of mantas and turtles came to a complete stop; for that island is one of the foremost of them all, and used to be the best in delivering turtle-shell.[48]

Such glimpses of local tribulations help us understand the connections between diplomacy, slavery, and natural resources. On one hand, the VOC demand engendered increasing indigenous slaving, while on the other this pushed un-enslaved people into closer dependency. Seeing their habitat acutely threatened by slavers, the islanders sought protection with the well-provided Europeans, themselves slavers operating in an

[46] Els M. Jacobs, *Koopman in Azië: De handel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tijdens de 18de eeuw* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2000), 19-30, 37.
[47] James Francis Warren, *Iranun and Balangingi: Globalization, maritime raiding and the birth of ethnicity* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2002), 314-5.
[48] Heeres, "Documenten betreffende de ontdekkingstochten van Adriaan Dortsman," 636.

increasingly fine-tuned network, but usually not raiders. The limited economic basis of Malukan polities induced the Europeans to combine the 'orderly' slave trade with the extraction of products of nature, such as mantas and turtles. This had consequences for the human as well as natural environment, although the patchy sources make the ecological impact difficult to assess before the twentieth century. An account of Tanimbar from 1886 mentions sea cucumber, turtle-shell and shark fins as significant export items, but no mantas anymore.[49]

DOUBTS AMONG ASIAN ELITES

Slavery and coerced labour transcended geographical, ethnic, and religious borders in the Indian Ocean World. But were there counterforces where Asian diplomacy prevented, or tried to prevent, acquisition? Global history shows that slavery and coerced labour was present almost everywhere in the premodern world, and that ideological abolitionism is a very late phenomenon that only gained leverage towards the late eighteenth century.[50] Nevertheless, while, for example, the densely populated Balinese kingdoms had few qualms about delivering indigenous prisoners of war or undesirables as export items, some polities approached by the VOC did see the downside of the changes in the human environment that a large outflow of coerced manpower would bring. A case that is not included in the *Corpus Diplomaticum* concerns the small and relatively resource-poor island Savu to the west of Timor, where a local polity made an agreement in 1672 to deliver 100-150 slaves to the Dutch in exchange for military support. However, the pledge had only been made under duress, and the Dutch demand for so much manpower led to violent resistance. This in turn ushered in a bloody VOC expedition where the Savu polity was forced into a new agreement to hand over 300 slaves (of which 240 were actually delivered).[51] One may note that coerced labour was a feature in the hierarchical Savu society, and the resistance had an economic base: in a polity with no more than several thousand inhabitants, the sudden loss of manpower threatened the fragile relation between humans and their sources of livelihood. The local economy was based on the tapping of sugar juice from lontar palms, a hard and cumbersome task in which slaves were involved.[52]

[49] Riedel, *De sluik- en kroesharige rassen*, 288-9.
[50] Richard H. Newman, *Abolitionism: A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2028), 16-28.
[51] Duggan and Hägerdal, *Savu*, 161-7.
[52] Ibid., 308.

Larger and more densely populated polities were also sometimes unwilling to yield manpower to the Europeans. The only agreements with a mainland Southeast Asian polity to mention slaves during the period are, not surprisingly, Arakan (Rakhine) with its capital in Mrauk-U. The Arakanese kingdom traded in slaves on a grand scale, taken in by 'pirates' (*magh*), often people of Luso-Asian descent, in the Bay of Bengal. Most slaves (*kywan*) originated from Bengal, whose coasts were reportedly increasingly desolated and empty due to the annual loss of manpower.[53] The slaving activities interested the VOC, mainly because of the need for manpower on the Banda plantation. In fact, slaves were the main reason for them to trade with Arakan, and a brisk commerce took place. However, in a *firman* that was issued in 1643, king Narapati decreed that the Dutch representative may:

> …freely order to purchase beeswax, gumlac, kasumba, indigo, coarse white cloth. He may buy unhusked rice and rice when in excess; if it is scarce, he may buy less … As regards slaves that he may wish to buy, let him buy them in Bengal. Those who arrive with the armada are reserved, those knowing some handicraft that I will not allow him to buy. Here in my gold-rich country, do not let him buy one slave.[54]

The message was clear: the king found skilled enslaved people too valuable to be brought overseas. Arakan was a relatively important polity until the late seventeenth century, but manpower was probably not abundant – as in many parts of Southeast Asia, possession of people was more important than land. Here, enslaved labour was vital since it was used in expanding agriculture to new land.[55] Nevertheless, Arakan was known as a major slave market where people were sold in markets of the Bengal Bay and even exported to Aceh. The king was keen to keep the skilled manpower to strengthen his realm and the Dutch were referred to markets outside Arakan itself.[56]

A more ideological approach was taken by the regent of Jinji (Gingee) in Coromandel in the same year 1643. The contract (*caul*) with the VOC does not itself mention slaves, but a note about the negotiations provides an interesting stance:

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[53] Jacques Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie: Son histoire politique entre le début du XVe et la fin du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Publications de l'EFEO, 2004), 258.
[54] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, I, 414.
[55] Leider, *Le royaume d'Arakan, Birmanie*, 439-40.
[56] S.E.A. van Galen, "Arakan and Bengal, the rise and decline of the Mrauk U Kingdom (Burma) from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century AD" (Unpublished PhD diss.: University of Leiden, 2008), 225.

> The commissioners also asked the *nayak* in Jinji to buy 800 to 1000 slaves each year (as before), which was plainly refused, and they got the answer that it is not only very disgraceful to sell people, but also counted as a great sin before their gods.[57]

The passage stands rather unique in the history of VOC diplomacy in its moral and principal denigration of slave trade. However, the stance of the regent presumably expressed unwillingness to export slaves who were 'insiders,' that is, those belonging to the majority group. In fact, Jinji sold slaves both before and after the *caul*. But there were also tangible factors motivating the ruler's recalcitrance. The Muslim Bijapur and Golconda sultanates acutely threatened the Hindu Tamil territories and would swallow Jinji five years later.[58] An outflow of substantial manpower resources would threaten the stability of the human environment and impede resistance against the sultanates – themselves slavers on a grand scale.[59] Resistance against slave trade was therefore a strategy to preserve and stabilize a realm, which is also exemplified by the Maratha ruler Shivaji who invaded the Coromandel area in 1676-1677. He expressly prohibited the sale of humans in a treaty in 1677, which may be seen in the context of the widespread devastation of parts of South India in the 1640s and in 1659-1661, where warfare created a 'famine-slave cycle,'[60] These disturbances called for a policy of demographic stability in the newly acquired territories. Shivaji emphasized to the Dutch that his regime was something different from previous Muslim rule in southern India, which had readily allowed slave trade; if the Dutch would try to take in slaves despite the prohibition, Shivaji's men would forcibly stop them.[61]

SLAVE TRADE IN THE CONTRACTS

Reading through the 114 relevant contracts, it is apparent, and maybe not surprising, that the slave trade was a concern for the Dutch from the beginning, with the first slave clause dating from 1611.[62] As apparent from table 1 above, only 31 treaties have paragraphs that actually regulate the trade. As might be expected, many of these were concluded with East

[57] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, I, 400.
[58] Rao Bahadur C.S. Srinivasachari, *A History of Gingee and its Rulers* (Madura: Annamalai University, 1943), 165, 184.
[59] Vink, "'The World's Oldest Trade'," 142.
[60] Ibid., 140-2.
[61] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, III, 64.
[62] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, I, 91.

Indonesian elites, but none with the kingdoms of Java or the Malay World. There are several aspects to this. The politically fragmented nature of the eastern polities, as well as the persistent local religious systems often branded as 'animism,' contrasts with western and central Indonesia with a higher degree of political integration among large or medium-sized Islamic kingdoms. However, this is more a tendency than a rule, since stateless non-Muslim communities were found in areas in the interior of Sumatra, Kalimantan, and the Malay Peninsula. Conversely, there were a few relatively powerful kingdoms in the east, especially Gowa and Ternate.

An interesting pattern of trading enslaveable 'others' can be found among the western polities of Indonesia that acknowledged slave trade in the contracts with the VOC. These were villages in Nias and West Sumatra, which were either non-Muslim or had non-Muslim hinterlands.[63] The population of Nias consisted of socio-political units called *ori* and had a division in elite (*si'ulu*), commoners, and slaves who could be acquired through raiding or legal punishment.[64] The Nias contracts in 1693 mention that the merchandise on the island mostly consisted of slaves and foodstuffs, in that order, which had to be thenceforth sold exclusively to the Dutch, who were moreover exempted from tolls. There was also a local initiative to this, since Nias settlements had actively invited the VOC post in Padang to make an alliance since 1669. This interest in Company protection, and the acceptance of the contracts, is again related to the human-environment nexus: raiders from Aceh took a multitude of slaves by force, which threatened the habitat and deterred people from the coast.[65] In fact, the Nias people were known to fear the sea and settled on the tops of hills.[66] The official report of the diplomatic mission in 1693 relates that the Company crew, in order to impress the locals, had to fight Acehnese raiders who had built stockades (*paggers*) at various spots on Nias:

> In the meantime, we encountered each other. The enemy fought ferociously, but luck served us since one of the [Acehnese] brothers, Raja Bongsu, and still two others, were shot dead. Upon that, the rest of them all fled towards the forest, leaving nothing but the empty *pagger*, which we committed to the flames. Towards the evening we went aboard again. However, the *panghulus*

[63] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, IV, 15, 20, 27, 31, 39, 46, 52.
[64] Wolfgang Marschall, "Nias and Simeulue," in *Aceh: History, Politics and Culture*, eds. Arndt Graf, Susanne Schröter, and Edwin Wieringa (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), 231-2.
[65] E.E.W.G. Schröder, *Nias: Ethnographische, geographische en historische aanteekeningen en studien* (Leiden: Brill, 1917), I, 703.
[66] Marschall, "Nias and Simeulue," 229.

> [chiefs] had not yet come to us as promised. Therefore, on the 30th [of March], we sent the interpreters to them again, who returned on the 31st, reporting that the *panghulus* would surely come to us in the morning, which also happened on the 1st of April. They did their excuses that they had not come earlier, since they had not dared to do so for fear of the robbers. However, now that these had been expelled, all was well again, and they appeared to be very content with this and gave their utmost thanks. They promised to try to search for as many slaves and hogs as possible to keep in store when one of our ships came. However, at the moment they had none, since the tiniest slave that they had got, immediately had to be given to the Acehnese, which were at the ready. We further spoke with them about contract-making, which they were very inclined to, and which was also fulfilled on the 3rd.[67]

The situation was more complicated than the quote suggests, however: the Acehnese bonded some of the *si'ulu* who profited from the export of manpower by bartering slaves for gold. As hinted in the report, the contracts were not intended to stem the export since they merely implied that slaves were meant to go to the Dutch-controlled goldmines of West Sumatra. Moreover, the instruments did not save the islanders from Acehnese slaving, which went on until the nineteenth century.[68]

That slaving activities had an impact on human habitation is obvious. This is not only because the enslaved performed work that significantly changed the local environment (tending plantations, clearing land, doing construction work, gathering forest and sea products), but also because the regions affected by slaving changed through depopulation and the strategy of establishing less vulnerable forms of settlement.[69] It is exactly this pattern that can be seen on Nias and it is also discernible in large parts of eastern Indonesia. In the corpus of contracts, there are four where the Dutch expressly enjoined the other part to acquire new slaves and to sell to the Company. Interestingly, all four were concluded with Muslim eastern Indonesian groups. In two contracts from 1646, the seafaring inhabitants of Solor vowed to go with their ships to the outer (southern) and inner (northern) coasts of Timor and the surrounding islands. There, they were to obtain

[67] Report, Joannes Sas, 1693, f. 286r, VOC 1536, NA
[68] Schröder, *Nias*, I, 725.
[69] Ulbe Bosma, "Smallpox, vaccinations, and demographic divergences in nineteenth-century colonial Indonesia," *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 171-1 (2015), 80-2.

slaves, beeswax, and turtle-shell, in that order, to hand over to the commander of the Dutch fort against textiles and other necessities.[70]

The combination of the slave and sandalwood trades was also important. From the end of the seventeenth century, the sandal forests declined due to overcutting, while Timorese slaving expanded greatly.[71] In another political deal with consequences to this day, considering the Indonesian hold over West Papua, the VOC acknowledged the power of the Malukan sultanate Tidore over Papua (1667) on condition that the VOC could ask for slaves from that area when needed.[72] Similarly, the chiefs of Keffing, east of Seram, and Onin in Papua, were to undertake to collect slaves and the valuable massoy bark that was used for medical purposes, implicitly from Papua, to be picked up by Dutch ships some months into the east monsoon. Everything was neatly arranged: male slaves which measured around 1.5 meters or above cost 16 rixdollars while 'healthy and good maids' went for 15 ½ (which hints at quite low average height in the region). The chiefs could then take out a corresponding number of cloths from the Company store in Banda, since textiles from India were in huge demand and propelled the economic flows.[73]

Apart from being bad news for the bees, turtles, and trees, the treaties imply an entwinement of European and indigenous forms of slaving. To be more exact, the European demand reinforced older traditions of raiding through their continuous requisition of coerced labour. From other sources, we know that people in the Timor Islands avoided settling at the coast, preferring elevated places due to the risks of unwelcome visitors – in other words similar to Nias.[74] The seventeenth-century sources speak of extensive slaving in the Timor Islands committed by Makassarese, Portuguese, Dutch, and others, apart from internal raiding among local populations. A VOC report from 1666 points out how diplomatic initiatives of the local Timorese kingdoms could have disastrous consequences if the locals misjudged the power balance in the Archipelago:

> It is certain that the Portuguese, both Hornay in Amarasi and Mateus da Costa, are very intent on taking the land. They steadily go with a movable power here and there, like not long ago in the month November [1665], when

[70] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, I, 462, 470.
[71] Hägerdal, *Lords of the Land*, 311; Sint Nicolaas, "Maritime (im)mobility," 71.
[72] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, II, 352.
[73] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, III, 149. For the textile trade, see: Ruurdje Laarhoven, "The power of cloth: The textile trade of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) 1600-1780 (Unpublished PhD diss., Australian National University, 1994).
[74] M. Teixeira, *Macau e a sua diocese* (Macau: Tip. do Orfanato Salesiano, 1957), IV, 447.

> it was known that the aforementioned Da Costa, with the assistance of many indigenous people, moved into the places Wewiku-Wehali and Cailaco, made the prisoners into slaves, and made a great booty. The reason was that certain people, corresponding with the Makassarese, had also received krises and assegais as token of submission.[75]

In the same way, several contracts that the VOC concluded with East Timorese coastal rulers in 1668, which reserved the purchase of slaves for the Dutch, were immediately followed by violent incursions by the Portuguese rivals, where lots of inhabitants were reduced to slavery and others migrated overseas.[76] In such instances, both the contracts and the contestations of them, directly affected the human and also natural environment due to depopulation and refugee streams; a refugee leader is remembered to have made an ecological imprint by bringing bananas, sago, and betel to Wetar Island.[77]

Similar patterns to Timor occurred in Papua (the Papuan Islands and mainland New Guinea), where the demand for enslaved people by Dutch and others led to extensive violence, where seaborne Papuans raided coastal areas on a grand scale, causing instability in the stateless area – the abovementioned contact between the VOC and Tidore in 1667 has a role in this.[78] Slaving was combined with resource extraction through the demand for loris, birds-of-paradise, and valuable trees. The effects on the avifauna and forested lands are, however, only documented in the periods of late-colonial and post-colonial exploitation.[79]

RESISTANCE

What has been said so far may give the impression of a somewhat 'neat' slave market, with clearly defined labels of free/unfree. The contracts were highly official instruments, meant to be adhered to for decades and more, and as such give very cursory information about the actual condition of the slaves. Taken together, however, they actually tell us something of their agency, and how they sought to resist their predicament. The great

[75] Report, Kupang to Batavia, 12-7-1666, f. 610, VOC 1257, NA.
[76] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus* II, 393, 396, 409; Hans Hägerdal, "Wetar and Kisar in Indonesia, and East Timor: Colonial encroachment, migration, and strategies of survival in the 17th century," *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 47, 138 (2019), 207.
[77] Tuti Munawar, *Cerita dari Pulau Wetar* (Jakarta: Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 1980), 15-6.
[78] Muridan Widjojo, *The Revolt of Prince Nuku: Cross-cultural alliance-making in Maluku, c.1780-1810* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).
[79] Pamela Swadling, *Plumes from Paradise: Trade cycles in outer Southeast Asia and their impact on New Guinea and nearby islands until 1920* (Boroko: The Papua New Guinea National Museum, 1996), 61-6, 109-13.

majority of the contracts and agreements, 72 out of 114, contained clauses about slaves or serfs who escaped and were wanted back. These restitution clauses started with an agreement with the prince of Jayakarta on Java in 1611 and soon became a standard practice when political contracts were drawn up.[80] The fear of runaway slaves joining Southeast Asian settlements and polities is obvious, as it would weaken the social position of the Europeans, create hostile maroon communities, and perhaps challenge the dominant position of the VOC. From other materials we know that the last-mentioned did occur, especially in the relatively vulnerable posts in eastern Indonesia. A contract with Ternate in 1638 specifically mentioned a maroon community on the relatively inaccessible island Buru, which the Ternatan sultan pledged to terminate.[81] Such maroon settlements continued to be a problem for the Europeans throughout the existence of the Company, explaining the multitude of slave clauses, although they may not have attained the size and resilience of similar ex-slave creations in Latin America.[82]

In order to stymy widespread maroonage, the Dutch used a combination of promises and threats in their diplomacy with Asian rulers. First, there was an element of reciprocity in most of the clauses; the Asian ruler promised to make sure that fugitive slaves were returned to their ostensibly rightful owners, but the opposite was also the case. Runaways who sought refuge in VOC territory were to be apprehended and sent back the polity they came from. Moreover, the restitution of fugitives could be a profitable affair for individuals or communities, since the Company provided fees of varying size for anyone handing over an escapee: such as 4 rixdollars in West Sumatra and 10 rixdollars in Banten.[83] For polities that were heavily under the influence of the VOC, severe penalties applied to those who knew about the fugitive slaves but desisted from apprehending them. If someone in the VOC dependencies in West Sumatra was caught with keeping a Company slave, he was to pay 100 rixdollars, which he could probably not fulfil unless rather wealthy.[84] Even more severe, the grandees of Johore undertook to execute the culprit as well as one slave. It was specified in the contract that this was a deterrent, highlighting a sense of anxiety that linked colonial and Asian elites.[85] All this served to perpetuate a system of bonded labour that flourished in the directly ruled Dutch territories

[80] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, I, 91.
[81] Ibid., 319.
[82] Vink, "'The World's Oldest Trade'," 172-5.
[83] Heeres and Stapel (eds.), *Corpus*, III, 340, 431.
[84] Ibid., 431.
[85] Ibid., 383.

until the nineteenth century, again with consequences for the human environment, since certain works would normally not be done by free commoners.

CONCLUSION

As diplomatic documents, the treaties and agreements of the VOC era were the result of reciprocal communication and differ from the imperious contracts of the late colonial era. As pointed out by Saliha Belmessous, the concept of colonial treaty, let alone imperial or unequal treaty, was not used at the time, as there was no necessary divide between intra-European and European-overseas treaties.[86] The VOC in the seventeenth century made treaties with all sorts of Asian polities, independent and dependent, large and miniscule, centralized and dispersed. At this point in time the treaties still tended to have an element of mutual benefits and breathed an amount of respect for the Asian part, a phenomenon that did not hinder the Dutch from securing the main advantages and from putting treatymaking at the heart of its strategy of colonial expansion.[87] The frequent references to slaves in the treaties were part of the strategy, but still presuppose a mutual conceptual comprehension despite the clauses hardly containing any definitions of what constituted a slave. Whatever the precise terminology and legal status, heavily bonded manpower was a given social category in most early modern societies. For Europeans and Asians alike, this made contractual understandings possible. Again, one must nevertheless be careful when interpreting the texts that have only come down to us in Dutch. To reiterate: a closer look at other historical and anthropological data shows that what the Europeans called slaves corresponded to a variety of heavily subordinated social groups in Asian societies.[88] An analysis of the treaties highlights the complex ways that the VOC integrated slaving in their activities. The value of enslaved humans as commodities is seen from their role as fines, as well as through the obligations of the Asian counterpart to commit slaving. While the slave-related treaties were not necessarily representative of the slaving circuits of seventeenth-century maritime Asia, the VOC made much effort to include minor polities and stateless areas, especially in eastern Indonesia. Here, the treaties reveal the dilemmas of vulnerable polities who were pushed to bond the VOC, facing increased slave raiding of Asian groups that itself was propelled by Dutch demands. The personal and collective

[86] Saliha Belmessous, "What is a colonial treaty? Questioning the visible and the invisible in European and Non-European legal negotiations," *Comparative Legal History*, 10, 2 (2022), 137-71.
[87] Van Ittersum, "Empire by Treaty?," 172-3.
[88] Gwyn Campbell, "Introduction: Slavery and other forms of unfree labour in the Indian Ocean World," in *The Structure of Slavery*, ed. Campbell (London & Portland: Frank Cass, 2004), xv-xviii.

traumas of enslavement are interestingly visible in the numerous references to runaways in the paragraphs. Rare initiatives by Asian rulers to halt slave trade were, however, motivated by practical concerns of demographic stability.

The corpus also reveals a marked correlation between slaving and other types of resource exploitation. The trade of the VOC was mainly in goods of 'luxury' (non-necessary) type, rather than bulk goods.[89] In relatively marginal areas, especially in eastern Indonesia, the Company typically sought to increase profitability by combining globally or regionally profitable sea and forest products with the slave trade, as testified by several treaties. The impact of all this on the human and natural environment is difficult to trace in detail, but was certainly not negligible. The mining activities in West Sumatra, the Banda plantations, the eradication of unpermitted spice trees, and the works undertaken in a string of port cities, were achieved through the deployment of slave labour via multiple treaties. Labour was scarce in much of Southeast Asia and raiding and trafficking (sometimes actively enjoined in the treaties) caused depopulation and relocation to less vulnerable settlements. All this significantly changed patterns of livelihood, especially in eastern Indonesia – although Asian groups were also involved in slaving. The contracts might be terse-worded and formulaic, but they express a will to regulate and subordinate societies on a permanent basis – whether they remained dead letters or not. They are one of many avenues for the study of unfreedom and its consequences in the Indian Ocean World.[90]

[89] Emmer and Gommans, *The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600-1800*, 32.

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