

New discoveries on Southeast Asia's maritime and diplomatic history 1600-1800

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AT THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE of the Southeast Asia Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (SARBICA), 27 September 2013, the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia launched a new website which gives online access to one of its most valuable collections: the archives of Batavia Castle, the former headquarters of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Since then, with a daily speed of 1,000 pages, a massive amount of information has become available on the website www.sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id. A select group of international historians have long surmised that the Batavia Castle archives would offer surprises, but nobody expected so much new data on the region's maritime and diplomatic history. Old collections offer new research perspectives.

The challenge to put thousands of pages of archives online is more than just a logistical one. It is also a matter of implementing new technology and knowledge. High-tech scanners for 'preservation imaging' and durable data storage facilities improve by the year and become ever more affordable. The Digital Archives at ANRI (DASA) project in Jakarta is an innovative project in Indonesia. A specialized Dutch foundation, The Corts Foundation (TCF), funds the project, and arranges for technical assistance. TCF is also responsible for the development of databases, software and web applications.

Intellectual challenge

From a professional historian's perspective, the more complex challenge is intellectual and linguistic. How to make these old and linguistically challenging 17th and 18th-century sources relevant not only for Southeast Asian historians and students but also for the wider public? The archives of the VOC have a reputation as a key resource for historians wishing to tell the story of the Dutch East India Company and the activities of its far-flung personnel scattered in a wide arc between Deshima in Japan to Isfahan in Persia where they serviced the two-way trade between Asia and Europe. Dutch historiography continues to explore this storyline, focussing for instance on the lives of individual sailors like in Roelof van Gelder's excellent biography of the German George Naporra (1731-1793), or the recent publication by G.J. Schutte of the private letters of the high Company official Willem Fockens, Governor of Java's Northeast Coast (1763-1768).

Recent political interest in Intra-Asian trading networks in the VOC era, however, stress the need for Asian historians to participate in the ongoing debate on maritime history and identity. Chinese political projections of a 'Maritime Silk Road' and most recently the ambition of Indonesia's new President Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') to revitalize Indonesia's 'Great Maritime Past' underscore the need for historians to explain history and to counter misconceptions. Whoever visits the newly built Sam Poo Kong Temple complex in Semarang with its unabashed glorification of Chinese Admiral Cheng Ho (1371-1433) realizes just how important it is to construct an accurate history of the past on the basis of archival evidence.

Since 2003, the VOC archives have been included in UNESCO's Memory of the World International Register. This means that the nearly two kilometres of old documents in Jakarta have been officially recognized as 'cultural heritage'. The question now is how to make this massive collection available for contemporary researchers? In every epoch people ask different questions about the past, and many of these questions are related to ethnic, cultural and national identity.

Paper remnants of global, regional and local trading networks

The archives of the VOC in Jakarta may best be seen as the most voluminous paper record of the Europe-Asia and Intra-Asiatic

maritime trade networks of the 17th and 18th centuries. The Daily Journals of Batavia Castle between 1624 and 1806 are an excellent example of the richness of this archival resource. This 80,000 page chronicle was created in Batavia Castle, the headquarters of the VOC administration in Asia. The Daily Journals registered all incoming and departing ships to and from Batavia. This is important new data. An earlier publication using parts of the Daily Journals published by the Institute for Dutch History in The Hague lists all ships sailing to and from Europe: a total of 4,700 ships went to Asia and 3,400 came back, a database of 8194 voyages (see resources. huygens.knaw.nl/das/voyages), the largest so far.

Besides this published data on ship voyages, the Daily Journals offer much new information on a range of other topics. They also contain a systematic registration implemented by the Batavia Castle administration of all European ships participating in the Intra-Asian maritime trading networks. This data helps us to understand European participation in the Asian trade: cargoes and flow of goods; frequency of voyages to certain ports; key trading entrepôts; export production and changes in local economies. The Daily Journals are the only available serial source to research the history of these intra-Asian ship movements.

The Daily Journals also registered the departure and arrival of junks from China. Other archival series in Jakarta, preserve a goodly number of early eighteenth-century cargo lists from Chinese junks. These lists substantially amplify the data collected and published by Paul van Dyke. Furthermore, the Daily Journals serve as a register of vessels in the petty trade in and out of Sunda Kelapa, Batavia's old harbour. Thousands of small and medium vessels, from the *prahu* and *gonting* and *penchalang*, which arrived from the ports of Java's Northeast coast, Madura, Bali, Banjarmasin and those around the Straits of Melaka and Sunda Shelf, were registered, including short descriptions of their cargoes and crews. Some of the data for the year 1775 has been analysed by G.J. Knaap; and similar data on Makassar was likewise studied by G.J. Knaap and H. Sutherland. When other Daily Journals (for instance the Daily Journals of Ternate in Maluku) are also included, it is possible to reconstruct large sections of the maritime trade in the Indonesian archipelago, a real boon for maritime historians.

Multiple centres of diplomacy

Although some of the Daily Journals (published in 31 volumes – most of the years between 1624 and 1682) are a well known source, few historians are aware that Old Dutch translations of diplomatic letters from sultans, kings and local regents, like the powerful sultan of Banten to the minor regent of Sonbai (West Timor) were systematically inserted into these journals. Sadly the elaborately calligraphed originals have been lost. Batavia Castle received letters from Southeast Asian rulers on a weekly basis. Malay was often the language used in such letters, known in the Malay world as the *Surat Emas* or Golden Letters because of their appearance. Unfortunately the original letters were not preserved in Batavia Castle or were subsequently destroyed. When one realizes the ease and frequency with which regional rulers wrote letters to Batavia, one may only speculate that each of the centres of power kept their own archives containing diplomatic correspondence, including letters exchanged between regional rulers. The Daily Journals bear witness to the fact that Batavia was only one player in the region's correspondence networks. Diplomatic envoys, the sending of gifts and exchange of letters via a well-developed post delivery service (involving horsemen, runners and ships' captains) was a daily reality; and to this correspondence Europeans added their own document flow.

Unfortunately, from the original documents earlier kept in palaces [*kratons*] and fortified settlements [*banteng*] almost nothing has survived. What is left are rather small library collections of original Malay, Minangkabau, Javanese or Buginese manuscripts, many of them not much older than the eighteenth century. These have been professionally catalogued by outstanding historians and curators, such as Pieter Voorhoeve, Merle C. Ricklefs, Edwin P. Wieringa, Ben Arps and Annabel Teh Gallop.

After an initial analysis of the Daily Journals of Batavia Castle it became clear that the number of letters that were inserted in this series surpass all other known collections of commensurate size in Asia. The first stage, involving a database of 4,423 letters covering the years 1683-1743 was published on the Sejarah Nusantara website in December 2014. This database was constructed by two students from Leiden University's Department of History, Simon Kemper and Maarten Manse. All names of the letter senders, including 690 names of regional rulers – some of them hitherto unknown – have been processed ruler by ruler. The second stage of the project in 2015 will result in the completion of the database, including all letters inserted in the Daily Journals from the earlier 1624-1682 period and the second half of the eighteenth century. This last part will offer quite a few surprises. During the administrative reforms of Governor-General W.G. van Imhoff (in office 1743-1750) it was decided to discontinue the insertion of translated letters into the Daily Journals. An entirely separate collection of incoming and outgoing letters from/to Asian rulers during the 1750-1812 resulted from this decision. Some 28 volumes of these letters (a few hundred of them in the original Asian languages) are currently being inserted into the database by ANRI archivists and language experts. By 2015 these documents will have been digitalized and published on the Sejarah Nusantara website.

Visualization and interpretation

The data in these letters between Batavia Castle and rulers in various locations are processed with a special software application on the website Sejarah Nusantara. The geographic visualization depicts Batavia Castle at the centre of a nexus of diplomatic and political relationships. The lack of Asian archival documents and data from other ports and political centres makes it impossible to depict any other maritime or political power centre in the same way. The lack of local Asian archives will make it difficult to interpret the diplomatic and political relations between other ports and centres and Batavia Castle. Powerful political centres with strong interests such as Banten, Ayuttaya or Kartasura had their own political and trading networks. Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to see their relationship with Batavia in the wider historical context. It is also too often quickly concluded by historians that a contract between Batavia and a local ruler immediately led to a 'submission' of a ruler. In fact, the implementation of political and trading contracts required continuous further negotiations. Military defeats – like Gowa (Makassar, 1667) and Ternate (1683) – meant full control passed to the VOC; the rulers became vassals, but at the same time, the constant correspondence between Batavia Castle and such defeated rulers shows how much was still subject to negotiation, adaptation and mutual consent. The diplomatic letters show various forms of cooperation and mutual interest. All together the thousands of exchanges constitute an enormous challenge for historians desirous of reinterpreting Southeast Asia's history in its local, regional and global context.

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Above: Pencil drawing by Jan Brandes, depicting the reception of an embassy from Kandy to the Dutch fort in Colombo (1785). Brandes inserted labels to identify the Kandyan officials and the rank and identity of many of the VOC officers. These additions have been essential in allowing scholars to interpret this image and others with similar content.

Inset: Website logo.