Sektion VII

Languages of Communication: Southeast and East Asian Rulers in Treaties and Epistolary Communications (c. 1500–1750)

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Lost in Translation? The Languages of Euro-Southeast Asian Diplomacy in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries

Abstract This chapter explores some of the issues related to Europe's diplomatic engagement with Asia in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries with special attention placed on the early Dutch contacts with Southeast Asia in the period c. 1595–1620. The over-arching questions addressed are these: How did the Dutch present themselves to their Southeast Asian hosts and in turn, how were Southeast Asian princes, officials and their core political values translated and made accessible to the Dutch leaders in commerce and politics in Europe? What were the underlying assumptions of the Malay rulers in selected dealings with the Dutch? Four areas will be examined in more detail: first, translating ideas and institutions of the Dutch Republic into a Malay cultural framework; second, challenges faced by the Europeans in understanding the status and titles of local rulers; third, decoding Malay political values and concepts; and fourth, ways in which local governments and societies were transformed by the Dutch on treating them as republics.

This paper is about the appropriation and adaptation of language, concepts, terms, names of officers and institutions by the Dutch in Southeast Asia during the period c. 1595–1640. I argue that authors of official or semi-official documents translated and culturally adjusted their terminology to suit specific target audiences, objectives, and cultural settings. It is a phenomenon that researchers have long been aware of, but has not been researched in detail. Such culturally adjusted translations and adaptations would have far-reaching consequences as they established a foundation upon which knowledge would later be built. These influenced decision-makers not just in the host locality, but importantly also in the boardrooms of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and among government leaders in Europe.

The process of translation and adaptation was not unidirectional: there were recognizable efforts by the Dutch to translate European concepts into Southeast Asian languages such as Malay; and in turn, Malay terms and expressions had to be made understandable to a European readership still unfamiliar with Southeast Asian values, institutions, and conventions.

Early modern documents touching on the first European contacts with Southeast Asia sometimes leave the reader wondering just how much a given author actually understood the situation being addressed or described. Questions emerge: How good was his command of the local language? How good was his grasp of local issues? Did he have local informants who advised him, and who might they have been? How problematic would it be for a researcher today to rely on the information and analysis provided?

Early European visitors to Southeast Asian ports and courts were placed in a position to wield considerable agency and also established a knowledge base upon which subsequent decisions would be made. Factors of the VOC, for example, were often men on the spot who were more than just resident representatives of a chartered trading company. They were also important cultural mediators who had to negotiate ideas, concepts, and institutions for their superiors in Europe, as well as for their host societies in Southeast Asia and beyond. They acted as political observers and analysts who were in regular epistolary contact with their immediate superiors – or with other officers and agents in what could be dubbed inter-factory chatter.[1] Old hands experienced in the ways of Asian statecraft and diplomacy were rare in the initial decades of the VOC, but they did increase in number over time.

The following chapter has been divided into four sections. The first explores key facets of Dutch self-presentation in Southeast Asia during the first decades of the seventeenth century, specifically focusing on the problems associated with explaining and translating ideas pertaining to a republican form of government. The second section continues with issues of translation and focuses on how the Dutch were grappling to understand with whom and in what capacity they were forging treaties and alliances. This leads to the third section about sovereignty

1 See Herman T. Colenbrander, ed., *Dagh-Register gehouden int Casteel Batavia vant passerende daer ter plaets als over geheel Nederlandts-India* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1896–1931). For the early VOC period, see specifically Herman T. Colenbrander and Willem Ph. Coolhaas, *Jan Pieterszoon Coen: Bescheiden Omtrent Zijn Bedrijf in Indië*, 9 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1919–1953). Also Johan K.J. de Jonge, ed., *Opkomst van het Nederlandsch gezag in Oost-Indië: Verzameling van onuitgegeven stukken uit het oud-coloniaal archief*, eerste reeks (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1866–1925). For the Straits region, see Pieter A. Tiele and Jan E. Heeres, eds., *Bouwstoffen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanders in den Maleischen Archipel*, 3 vols. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1886–95).

and the core values of Malay political leaders, office holders, and institutions. The fourth plots how during the early years of Dutch penetration into Southeast Asia, discourses about a republican form of government focused on Banda and Ambon. Within a few years, the terminology had transformed. Rather than sustaining the liberty of these islanders, Dutch understanding of local Southeast Asian political institutions paved the way for their systematic downgrading and their ultimate annexation by the VOC, thus laying a cornerstone in the intellectual justification of the first Dutch empire in Southeast Asia.

Self-Presentation

On arriving at the ports of insular Southeast Asia at the end of the sixteenth century, the Dutch faced a number of formidable challenges. The first was dealing with the image that was being painted of them by their European enemies, especially the Spanish and the Portuguese, against whom the Dutch were waging war at the time.

The Portuguese policy of keeping navigational routes and techniques a closely-guarded secret was broken with the publication of Jan Huyghen van Linschoten's *Itinerario* and *Reysgeschrift* in 1595–96.[2] When secrecy failed to keep European competitors out of Asian emporia, the Portuguese increasingly relied on a new strategy: spreading malicious rumours about their European rivals, especially about the Dutch. At the courts of East and Southeast Asia, they compared the Dutch to sea-faring peoples in Asia: in China, the Dutch were compared to the Wak-O pirates (who are said to have come from the Japanese Islands and other places); and to the rajas of Southeast Asia, the Dutch were likened to rapacious nomadic sea tribes such as the *orang laut*. If badmouthing did not yield the desired results, the Portuguese sometimes harassed Asian rulers by imposing blockades or by raiding coastal settlements, as they did in Johor during the early 1600s.[3]

The Dutch thus found themselves engaging in damage control right from the start. They also did not find it easy to explain just who they were and how

2 Jan H. van Linschoten, *Itinerario: Voyage ofte Schipvaert van Jan Huygen van Linschoten naer Oost ofte Portugaels Indien, 1579–1592*, and *Reys-geschrift vande navigatiën der Portugaloysers*, eds. Hendrik Kern and Johan C.M. Warnsinck, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1939).

3 Peter Borschberg, *The Singapore and Melaka Straits: Violence, Security and Diplomacy in the 17th Century* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2010); Peter Borschberg, "Left Holding the Bag: The Johor-VOC Alliance and the Twelve Years' Truce (1606–1613)," in *The Twelve Years Truce (1609): Peace, Truce War and Law in the Low Countries at the Turn of the 17th Century*, ed. Randall Lesaffer (Leiden: Brill-Nijhoff, 2014), 89–120.

they could be slotted into an Asian – and specifically also Malay – world view, where monarchy was the only acceptable form of government and where there was a fluid hierarchy among the different (tributary) rulers.[4] The challenge was formidable: Just how should one explain a republic or a federation and make both understandable and acceptable in a Malay cultural context? It seems that the Dutch did not do this – at least not initially in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The question is, of course, why not?

The recorded experiences of the Venetian jeweller Gasparo Balbi from the 1580s point towards an answer.[5] During his audience with the ruler of the Taungoo dynasty kingdom (Pegu, Burma), Balbi was asked for the name of his king. He explained that he was from Venice, and that Venice had no king. At this point the Taungoo monarch reportedly began to laugh so hard that he started gagging and could hardly breathe.[6] Had this occurred in a Malay setting, it might have evoked a similar reaction – or perhaps even great pity and concern – for to not having a king was to live in a state of *huru hara* (chaos), in a state in other words where could be no traditions, no *adat* (customary law), and therefore no *keadilan* (broadly: justice) or *ma'amar* (prosperity).[7] A Dutchman could have replied that his country did have a king in more recent times, but

4 The key Malay term describing such conditions in the documentation would be *upeti* (sending of tribute), an act that implies the inferior status of the sender, but not necessarily that the sender is subject to *ta'alok* (suzerainty, overlordship) of the tribute's recipient. For a discussion of this in a Southeast Asian context, see Barbara W. Andaya, *Perak, the Abode of Grace: A Study of an Eighteenth-Century Malay State* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1979), 49; John M. Gullick, "Kedah 1821–1855: years of exile and return," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 56/2 (1983): 31–86, esp. 72; Kobkua Suwannathat-Pian, *Thai-Malay Relations: Traditional Intra-regional Relations from the Seventeenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988), 62n51, 65n85; Cyril Skinner, "A Malay Mission to Bangkok during the reign of Rama II," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 56/2 (1983): 135–141, esp. 139.

5 Gasparo Balbi, *Viaggi dell'Indie Orientali di Gasparo Balbi, Gioielleriero Venetiano* (Venice: Apresso Camillo Borgominieri, 1590).

6 Gasparo Balbi, "Voyage to Pegu and Observations There, Circa 1583," *SOAS Bulletin of Burma Research* 1/2 (2003): 26–34.

7 Kassim Ahmad, ed., *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1968), 70, 307; Andries Teeuw and David K. Wyatt, ed., *Hikayat Patani* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970), 78, 131; John M. Gullick, *Indigenous Political Systems of Western Malaya* (London: The Athlone Press, 1958), 44–45; Anthony Milner, *Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982), 31–32, 94–95, 104, 109; Anthony Milner, *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya: Contesting Nationalism and the Expansion of Public Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 16–24.

that he had been deposed.[8] A statement along these lines would have certainly raised some eyebrows among Southeast Asian court officials. In Malay culture, to remove or depose a king by force was to seriously challenge divine providence and interfere with mystical prowess and the cosmic order.[9] Deposing a ruler was regarded as the gravest of sins, a very serious and unforgivable act known as *derhaka*.[10] A conversation like this would have just confirmed to the Malays those negative things the Iberians were spreading about the Dutch. The Malay rulers would have not only kept Dutch traders at a proverbial arms' length, they would have probably also barred them from trading at their ports and in their bazaars.

The other early European colonial powers did not face this problem of not having a king: not the Portuguese, Spanish, French, English, or even the Danes; they were all ruled by monarchs. But the Dutch *did* have this problem, and this situation gave birth almost immediately to one of the most bewildering translated – or should one rather say fabricated – expressions found in the official correspondence of the early VOC: the Malay term *Raja Belanda* or "king of Holland".[11] Of course the Dutch Republic did not have a king at the time, but it did have an aristocratic ruler: the stadtholder. Early letters by the Malay rulers are addressed to the "king of Holland" whom they affectionately call their "brother", in other

8 This resulted from the so-called Act of Abjuration of 1581. A copy with the original Dutch text together with German and English translations can be found in Wilhelm G. Grewe, ed., *Fontes Historiae Iuris Gentium: Sources relating to the History of the Law of Nations* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988–1992), vol. 2, 90–99.

9 Patrick E. de Josselin de Jong, "The Character of the 'Malay Annals,'" in *Malayan and Indonesian Studies: Essays Presented to Sir Richard Winstedt on his Eighty-fifth Birthday*, eds. John Bastin and Roelof Roolvink (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 239; Joanne H. Walker, "Autonomy, Diversity, and Dissent: Conceptions of Power and Sources of Action in the Sejarah Melayu (Raffles MS 18)," *Theory and Society* 33/2 (2004): 213–214; Maziah Mozaffari Falarti, *Malay Kingship in Kedah: Religion, Trade and Society* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 13.

10 Leonard Y. Andaya, *The Kingdom of Johor 1641–1728: Economic and Political Developments* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975), 8; Milner, *Invention of Politics*, 25–26; Walker, "Autonomy, Diversity, and Dissent," 213–216, 230–233.

11 Peter Borschberg, ed., *Journal Memorials and Letters of Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge: Security, Diplomacy and Commerce in 17th-century Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2015), esp. 488–489). One of the earliest formal usages of this expression is found in a letter by Admiral Wybrant van Warwyck in his letter to the king of Siam, dated 8 June 1604. See "Oost-Indische Reyse onder den Admirael Wybrandt van Waerwijck," in Isaac Commelin, *Begin ende Voortgang Vande Vereenigde Neerlandsche Geoctroyeerde Oost-Indische Compagnie,* 4 vols., facsimile reproduction of the original printed in Amsterdam in 1646 in two volumes, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: Facsimile Uitgaven Nederland, 1969), 73–74.

words as their imagined royal counterpart.[12] In practice such letters were received and read by the stadtholder, the States General, or both.

The question also arose as to how one could fit a title and institution like the "Their Most Mighty Lords, the Gentlemen States General" into a Malay world view. Almost right from the start, the VOC and its predecessor companies began concluding pacts, treaties, and alliances in the name of the Dutch States General, and sometimes in the name of the States General and the stadtholder together (this is how it was expressed in the Dutch text versions of the treaties at least).[13] Only later were these agreements signed in the name of VOC governor-general in Batavia. The early treaties with Malay rulers translate the name of this assembly, the States General, as "orang caya caya sacalien" (modern spelling: orang kaya-kaya sekali). This appears to be an effort at rendering the Dutch honorific of "Hoogmogende Heeren Staten Generaal" (Most Mighty Gentlemen States General).[14] The Malay term *kaya* literally means "rich", but it was also used in seventeenth century to refer to someone who is powerful, or the term was used as an honorific for an official of unspecified rank.[15] The term *orang kaya* was thus employed to address a Malay political official of good standing, respect, and authority. The Malay word *sekali* literally means, "once" or "one time". The way it is employed in this context is similar to the expression *semua sekali,* that is "altogether". The idea being expressed with *orang kaya sekali* is one where the *orang kaya* have "come together", say, for a meeting or an assembly. The portion translating the "Most Mighty Lords" into a Malay cultural context is thus clearly there, but what about the idea that the Dutch States General was a federative assembly? Rather than addressing the federative and republican character of their state, the Dutch formally presented themselves in their Malay language documents as being from a *negeri* (broadly: polity) called Holland, i.e. from *Hollande, Holanda*, or *Belanda,* as in the case of the *Raja Hollande/ Belanda* (king of Holland), or the "orang kaya-kaya sekali dari negeri Hollande/ Belanda" (the very powerful *orang kaya* from the *negeri* Holland who have come together). The multifaceted meaning of the term *negeri* will be explained in more detail below.

12 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials*, 450.

13 Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 86.

14 For this specific wording, see the treaty with Banda dat. 9 May 1621, Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 166.

15 Charles O. Blagden, ed., and Michael J. Bremner, trans., "Report of Governor Balthasar Bort on Malacca, 1678," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 5/1 (1927): 1–232, esp. 222; Henry Yule and Arthur C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* (Sittingbourne: Linguasia, 1994), 644–645.

Who signed treaties with whom? The problem with translating titles and offices

With whom did the Dutch *think* they were signing agreements? And what about the Asian, specifically Malay rulers? In the very early years of the VOC's lifespan, that is before a resident governor-general had been appointed (1602–10) and before he established himself at Batavia (c. 1620), the situation was murky. A Malay *raja* saw himself writing letters and striking deals with another *raja* (i.e. the king of Holland) who remained unseen in faraway Europe. The Malay rulers were making efforts to accommodate the Dutch, but in the early seventeenth century they were most interested in mobilizing and co-opting them in their own power plays against each other. This is important, in turn, for understanding how Malay titles and genealogical backgrounds were explained to the Dutch, and also how the Malays ensured that the Dutch understood a given title or honorific in specific ways. An excellent example is offered by the claim of the Johor ruler to be the rightful heir of the Melaka sultan, a claim that doubtlessly helped inspire the costly joint Dutch-Johorean military offensive on Portuguese Melaka in 1606. The Dutch were informed that they were assisting the Johor ruler to regain his rightful heritage and to avenge the Portuguese for Alfonso de Albuquerque's attack on the city in 1511. After all, the enemy of my enemy is my friend, and what could be more noble than to assist a friend and ally in distress (the hope of reaping tangible rewards in the event of a successful outcome notwithstanding)?

The Malay rulers, moreover, regarded the king of Holland's emissaries as a group of merchants. Mixing commerce and diplomatic business was common in (Southeast) Asia in this era and would have not raised any red flags at Malay courts. But it was not (just) the Europeans seizing the diplomatic initiative here: three embassies from Southeast Asian rulers actually make it to the Dutch Republic in the first decade of the seventeenth century: Aceh, Johor and Siam.[16] All of them appear to have been pro-active and should not necessarily be seen as direct responses to earlier Dutch initiatives. After 1610, Asian embassies no longer ventured on the long voyage to Europe, but instead were received by the VOC governor-general who a decade later established his seat and residence at Batavia. Over time and by the eighteenth century, the governor-general gained the reputation, exuded the aura, and indulged in the ceremonial ritual of an Asian tributary monarch, reinforced with all the pomp, material splendour, and visual trappings that would duly be expected of a powerful Asian monarch. That too

16 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials,* 54, 56–57, 95; Borschberg, *Straits*, 158, 280; Peter Borschberg, *Hugo Grotius, the Portuguese and Free Trade in the East Indies* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011), 364n71.

was self-representation, and in such a luxurious and materialistic manner that it would have seriously aroused suspicion and distaste among the staunch supporters of republican simplicity and parsimony in the Netherlands.

From the Dutch vantage point, the situation looked different, especially during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. There were admittedly several issues at play: Just how much did the VOC agents know and understand of local conditions at the time they were signing pacts and agreements with Southeast Asian overlords? How far did they grasp and comprehend the subtleties of power relations at a given court or among neighbouring rulers? Were they cognizant of how the honorific or title of a given ruler fit into the variegated levels of the aristocratic hierarchy? And how should one translate an unfamiliar title when it came to explaining oneself in letters with the VOC directors and authorities back home in Europe? Let us examine a few of the practical issues at hand:

First, the Dutch needed to recognize the full and unfettered sovereignty of a ruler in order to obtain what (at least from the vantage point of the Europeans) was a contract of (international) standing and validity, if that is even an expression that should be employed here.[17] In Europe, vassals were generally not empowered or authorized to conclude treaties with foreign rulers, at least not at their own initiative or accord, an arrangement that was further reinforced by the rise of the post-Westphalian state system. The Dutch became aware that not all rulers in Southeast Asia were sovereign in a European sense and whether such a uniform sense even existed in Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century is admittedly a matter of debate. In their documentation and correspondence, the VOC servants routinely speak of "vassals" or "vassalage".[18] For example, they were aware that the Melaka Sultan of the fifteenth century was a "vassal" of Siam, initially, and then had become a "vassal" of the Chinese emperor. Similar observations had also been registered by the Portuguese. The actual relationship referred to here is not a vassal in the sense of a European feudal state, but rather as a tributary relationship that was oriented toward trade and exchange. The ruler of Pahang in Malaysia was at one moment described as a vassal of Johor, on another occasion as a vassal of Patani (who, in turn, was said to be a vassal of Siam). Because of the largely voluntary nature of tributary relationships, rulers could position and reposition themselves within the hierarchy of rulers. A successful monarch could boast of many tributaries and followers, and in turn was a tributary of a more powerful overlord like China, Siam, or Pegu (Burma). A given ruler could enter into tributary relationships with multiple powerful monarchs, as the aforementioned case of Pahang can demonstrate. This phenomenon of *rajas* looking in different directions for leadership and potential support

17 See more extensively in Borschberg, *Hugo Grotius*, 68, 147–169.
18 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials*, 130, 154.

engendered the model of the *mandala* state which has been championed by Oliver Wolters among others. A variant explanation of these complex, overlapping, and intersecting relationships is Stanley Tambiah's galactic polity.[19]

The point is that when it came to signing treaties, the Dutch were generally aware of tributary status and relationships as well as of the hierarchical standing of a given monarch, but as a rule they cast all such considerations aside when they needed to secure a contract with him. Rather than describing him as a vassal, they now treated him as a sovereign lord who was fully empowered to sign international treaties with a European counter-party.

Just how misleading such a position could be is evidenced by the treaty signed by the VOC with the ruler of Sambas in October 1610.[20] The Dutch text formally identifies him as the "koning van Sambas" – the "king of Sambas", evoking images with a reader back in Europe of a sovereign ruler who commanded over a territory or a state that is incidentally also broadly staked out in the said treaty. But there are some curious problems with this treaty. First, the ruler of Sambas signed himself as "Pangeran Adipati Sambas".[21] The Javanese title *adipati* (from Sanskrit, lit. "first father") hardly refers to a king, and while the title *pangeran* indicates that he is a prince of the royal blood, he ranks further down the hierarchy than the title this Dutch-language treaty ascribes to him. An *adipati* is closer to a governor than a king, and the Adipati Sambas was elsewhere described as a vassal of the ruler of Brunei or alternatively also the king of Johor.[22] So it would appear that the Dutch upgraded the *adipati* to the status of king in order to secure a valid treaty with him.

The 1610 treaty with Sambas is curious for another reason: the ruler of Sambas traditionally enjoyed the loyalty of settlements along the Sambas River and its tributaries in the southwest of Borneo. The treaty also ascribes to him the regions further in the interior of the island called Landak and Mempawah which were famous for diamonds that were panned by the locals in the riverbeds during the dry season.[23] The tribal chiefs in these regions were traditionally loyal to (or were in a tributary relationship with) Sukadana. In 1610, however, Sukadana was in a state of political disarray because the queen, Putri Bunku, had supposedly

19 Oliver W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives,* rev. edn. (Singapore: ISEAS, 1982), esp. 27–28; 39; 126–54; Tony Day, *Fluid Iron: State Formation in Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), 157–158; Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), esp. 112.

20 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials,* 446–448.

21 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials*, 447n2.

22 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials*, 295.

23 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials*, 448, 579.

poisoned her husband Radin Wiera Kasuma in January 1609 and arrogated all power to herself. The tribal chiefs of Landak and Mempawah were not happy with this new development and were thus contemplating shifting their allegiance and tributary relationship to Sambas instead.[24] That, incidentally, did not come to pass. The Dutch were cognizant of the political problems at Sukadana and thus must have also become aware of the rumblings within the existing but fluid patterns of allegiance. It transpires that they lent support to their treaty partner, the Adipati Sambas, in asserting and extending his authority over these diamond-producing regions of Borneo. After all, this was also in their interest, for the VOC was doing brisk business in diamonds at not only Sambas and Sukadana, but especially also at Batu Sawar, the capital of Johor on the mainland.[25] But none of the Dutch documents as much as mentions the tributary relations of Sambas with Brunei.[26]

Just who the Dutch thought that they were negotiating and concluding treaties with is a matter of interest to historians today. We have just seen how they upgraded the Adipati Sambas to the status of "king". Another example is Pangeran Wijayakrama, the ruler of Jayakerta (Jacatra) to whom is also attributed the title "king" in the treaties of 1611, 1614, 1616 and 1619, even though the Dutch were well aware at the time that he was a tributary of Banten.[27] In fact, there seem to be several titles that were inflated by translation to become "king" in the official Dutch documents such as treaties and formal letters – but not necessarily in inter-factory correspondence within Asia. In those instances, the Malay title was generally retained. The title *raja* was usually translated as "king", although a *raja* could in fact be something more akin to a prince *(vorst)* or a local tribal leader *(penghulu, patih)*. The Dutch were aware that the Malay *Yang di Pertuan* is a title or an honorific, and also translated this as "king";[28] and so was the Malay title *ketua*. In the early seventeenth century, the title *sultan* was carried only by a few rulers in the Malay Muslim region. They preferred instead to employ another title already carried by the rulers of pre-Portuguese Melaka, namely the Persian honorific *shah*. The Portuguese routinely added the letters

24 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials*, 128. Concerning the shifting or switching of personal loyalties and specifically its relation to *derhaka* (treason), see also Milner, *The Invention of Politics,* 21–24.

25 Concerning the Batu Sawar diamond trade, see Peter Borschberg, "Batu Sawar Johor: A Regional Centre of Trade in the Early Seventeenth Century," in *Early Modern Southeast Asia (1300–1800),* eds. Ooi G.K. and Hoang A.T. (London: Routledge, 2016), 136–153.

26 Joanne H. Walker, "From Po-li to Rajah Brooke: Culture, Power and the Contest for Sarawak," *Journal of Borneo-Kalimantan* 2/2 (2016): 10–11.

27 Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, treaties of Jan. 1611, 86, 89; 21 Dec., 1614, ibid., 117; 8 Oct., 1616, ibid., 125; 19 Jan. 1619, ibid., 146; 1 Feb. 1619, ibid., 148.

28 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials,* 153.

"-xa" (pronounced vaguely as soft "-sha") after a personal name, e.g. "Modafaxa" or "Modafaixa" and is to be understood as "Modafar Shah"; "Xaquendarxa" is "Iskandar Shah".[29] The rulers of Johor and Aceh styled themselves as *shaḥ* and that of course also got translated by the Dutch as "king".

The early and mid-seventeenth century VOC documentation also employs the title *keizer* (emperor) in Southeast Asia. Already, the mid-sixteenth century *Commentaries of Alfonso de Albuquerque* noted that the Sultan of Melaka was widely known as the *coltois,* a title which he loosely translated as "emperor". One reading of this term (which is by no means certain) would be to take *coltois* as an orthographical variant of çultões (sultans). The word could alternatively represent a derivative of the term *kedatuan* (kraton, palace, empire), an expression historically associated with epigraphical materials of the Srivijayan Empire.[30] But *coltois* would more likely be associated with the idea of *ketua,* the "leader", here the "leading" or "senior king" among the Malay rulers. Before 1597, the ruler of Johor was generally referred to as "emperor", both by the Dutch as well as by the Portuguese.[31] We know from late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century materials that the rulers of Johor continued to carry the title of "emperor", or more specifically, "Emperor of the Malay Kings" until the death of Ali Jalla bin Abdul Jalil in 1597. In his letter to the king of Spain and Portugal, Philip II/I dated 28 November, 1587, Dom Paulo de Lima Pereira commented: "Raja Ali, king of Johor, who among the kings of the South bears the title 'Emperor of the Malay Kings'."[32] Similarly, the Flemish trader and adventurer Jacques de Coutre noted: "The king [of Johor] is named *Raxale* [Raja Ali]. His grandfather was the king of Melaka, which was an ancient city spanning 12 *leguas* [along the coast]. He gave himself the title 'Emperor of the Malays', which lapsed on his death and has not been revived".[33] Another ruler who was styled emperor by the VOC was the "emperor of Borneo", a precursor of the present-day sultan of Brunei.

29 Joaquim V. Serrão, ed. and int., *Comentarios de Afonso d'Albuqerque,* text of the 2nd edition of 1576, 2 vols. (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa de Moeda, 1973).

30 Johannes G. de Casparis, ed., *Prasasti Indonesia: Selected Inscriptions from the 7th to the 9th Centuries AD* (Bandung: Masa Baru, 1956), 18; Hermann Kulke, "Kedatuan Srivijaya: Empire or Kraton of Srivijaya? A Reassessment of Epigraphical Evidence," *Bulletin de l'École Française d'Extrème Orient (BEFEO)* 80/1 (1993): 159–180; Anthony Milner, *The Malays* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 30–31.

31 Leonard Y. Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree: Trade and Ethnicity in the Straits of Melaka* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2008), 104; Peter Borschberg, ed., *The Memoirs and Memorials of Jacques de Coutre: Security, Trade and Society in 17th Century Southeast Asia* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2014), 94, 187n14, 364; Borschberg, *Straits*, 226, 323n155; Jane Drakard, *A Kingdom of Words: Language and Power in Sumatra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 24, 75, 121, 125, 134–135.

32 Borschberg, *Straits*, 226, 323n155; and Borschberg, *Hugo Grotius*, 365–6n83.

33 Borschberg, *The Memoirs and Memorials of Jacques de Coutre*, 94.

We are, in fact, in possession of a draft letter written by Hugo Grotius that is addressed to the "emperor of Borneo".[34] On the island of Sumatra, the ruler of the Minangkabau is also generally styled "emperor" in Dutch sources.

Second, with the notable exceptions of Ambon and Banda (which will be discussed below) the treaties were signed with rulers in their personal capacity. The preambles of the treaty are already worded to make this clear. When a given signatory passed away, it was necessary to ratify a fresh agreement with his successor. Sometimes the new ruler refused to sign, as was notably the case with the Dutch-Aceh treaty of 1607 on the death of Ali Ri'ayat Shah.[35] His successor, Iskandar Muda, who would arguably enter the annals of history as Aceh's greatest ruler, refused to sign a renewal treaty with the VOC. When agreements were renewed by a successor, a clause would often state explicitly that the terms of the earlier treaty were upheld or reconfirmed. These treaties were certainly never deemed or intended to serve as perpetually-binding inter-state agreements that, as the aforementioned Grotius famously argued, had to be honoured in any case *(pacta sunt servanda)*.[36]

Sovereignty and the core values of Malay political leaders

As has been seen in the preceding section, many Malay titles were translated into Dutch as "king". A reader in Europe who had no idea about the actual situation on the ground in Southeast Asia might jump to some unwarranted conclusions. On reading about a treaty with a "king", two assumptions were likely. The first is that the king is the ruler of a certain kingdom, and second that this kingdom was also territorially defined. With reference to the Malay *kerajaan* (the state of having a monarch), both assumptions are fallacious.

This has already been discussed in considerable detail by Tony Milner in his study *The Malays*.[37] He carefully studied Malay language documents of an official nature and arrived an important observation: "A ruler was usually described as being (literally) 'on the throne of a *kerajaan* located in a specific *negeri*'. Thus, in 1787 we see a letter from Sultan Ala'udin who is 'on the throne of the *kerajaan* that is *in* the *negeri* Perak'. […] He is not described as the 'ruler *of* the *negeri* Perak'."[38] Problems surrounding the meaning and usage of the term *negeri*

34 Borschberg, *Hugo Grotius*, 18, 123, 344n71.

35 Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 48–50; Borschberg, *Journal Memorials*, 397–399.

36 Borschberg, *Hugo Grotius*, 103, 157.

37 Milner, *The Malays*.

38 Milner, *The Malays*, 59. Also Drakard, *A Kingdom*, passim; Gullick, *Indigenous*, 21. Concerning the *kerajaan* also Milner, *Kerajaan*, 7–8 and 112–116.

will be addressed in the following section. Suffice it for now to observe that in their own documentation, the Malay rulers did not describe themselves as "kings *of* Johor" – this is something the Europeans did – but rather saw themselves as a "kings *in* Johor". Does such a subtle difference in wording really matter? Yes it does. For by translating this title as "king *of* Johor" the Europeans were imagining a type of territorially-defined kingdom that was simply not there and not understood in that way.

Historians of the peninsula argue that the defining trait of a Malay polity was not land or territoriality, but people. A king was measured not by how much land he owned but by how many followers he was able to attract and retain. He was also judged by his aspirations and efforts to be *adil,* a word of Arabic origin with considerable complexity in Malay, meaning "just", "equitable", "circumspect", "balanced" and "generous"; the latter intimating the redistribution of wealth among the aristocracy as well as followers.[39] Gaining and retaining followers and tributaries increased a ruler's *nama* (reputation, name, prestige),[40] and a ruler with a good *nama* enjoyed not only an enhanced status and respect, but would correspondingly rise up through the hierarchy of rulers, a hierarchy it should be added here that was fundamentally determined by one's *nama.* The opposites of *nama* were *malu* or *aib,* that is "shame" or "dishonour".[41]

A scrutiny of some of the very early treaties evidences that the Dutch were aware that Malay polities emphasized people and followers and de-emphasized geographic expanse. A case in point is the treaty signed by Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge with the young Sultan Modafar and his council on Ternate on 26 May, 1607.[42] The Dutch language version of the treaty does in fact address Modafar as the "king of Ternate", but the wording of paragraph 9 merits special mention in this context. The treaty speaks of the "Ternatan crown's subjects", not the "kingdom of Ternate". These subjects lived on various islands or locations which are listed by name: Sula, Buru, Kambelo, Luhu, Maju, Manado, Celebes, Jailolo, More, Sarangani, and Mindanao.[43] The treaty is careful not to claim that these islands make up the territorial expanse of a kingdom of Ternate.

The treaty with Sambas, by contrast, is not as careful in the terminology that it selects. On the one hand it speaks of the "king of Sambas and his subjects,

39 Concerning the meaning of *adil (keadilan)* and its quality for attracting followers, see Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 42, 412; Concerning the relationship between the redistribution of wealth and the attraction of new followers, see esp. Milner, *Kerajaan*, 27–28, 131.

40 Concerning *nama*, see esp. Milner, *Kerajaan,* 104–6.

41 Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 80; Milner, *Kerajaan,* 27.

42 Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 50–53; Borschberg, *Journal Memorials*, 421–423.

43 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials,* 423.

including Mempawah, Landak, and other parts under his command" and then continues to speak of a "country" and of the king's "lands".[44] But admittedly the text never mentions a kingdom named Sambas.

It has already been stated that in many of the early treaties with Asian overlords, the Dutch were generally aware of the prevailing conditions, but for the purpose and objective of securing a(n international) treaty, they conveniently ignored tributary relationships. Up until the nineteenth century, both the Dutch and the British would brush aside as irrelevant and a nuisance any tributary ties that the Malay rulers of the peninsula might have historically maintained with the king of Siam. Such an attitude may very well have been a reaction to the way Malay *rajas* explained their relation or connection to Siamese rulers to a European audience. In the seventeenth century, the ruler of Kedah acknowledged his inferiority to the king of Siam, but insisted that this did not mean that he was subject to Siam's overlordship or suzerainty *(ta'alok)* as a vassal.[45] Later in the nineteenth century, the ruler of Terengganu explained that the sending of the *bunga mas dan perak* (gold and silver flower) to Bangkok should not be understood as a symbol of Terengganu's tributary relationship with Siam, but rather as *tanda s'pakat dan bersehabat*, a "token of alliance and friendship".[46] Here, the Malay rulers were again ensuring that acts, rites and practices were being understood by the Europeans in certain ways. Perhaps the most significant conclusion one can draw from these examples is this: Well into the nineteenth century, the hierarchy of rulers was not only acknowledged and accepted, but it was also not an issue for Southeast Asian rulers. They were not insisting on being regarded or treated as *equals* among one another.

The previous section has shown that many local titles had been translated as "king". All of these "kings" were assumed to be "despotic", essentially implying these rulers possessed unfettered sovereign authority that made it possible to sign a treaty with them. But there was more to being despotic than that. Scholars during the age of Renaissance and Humanism would have almost known their Aristotle by heart, and the ancient Greek philosopher informs that despotism is "rule without law, a perverted political system."[47] But in fact, Southeast Asia neither had rule devoid of law, nor was the political system perverted. Far from

44 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials*, 447–448.

45 Andaya, *Perak, the Abode of Grace*, 79.

46 Mubin Sheppard, "A short history of Trengganu," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22.3 (1949): 42.

47 Peter J. Marshall, "Afterword: the Legacies of Two Hundred Years of Contact," in *The Worlds of the East India Company*, eds. Huw V. Bowen, Margarette Lincoln and Nigel Rigby (Woodbridge and Rochester: The Boydell Press, 2002), 231.

being centralized states, many early modern polities had in fact multiple centres of political authority and legitimacy.[48]

With reference to sovereignty, the question naturally arises as to how it was understood by each side – that is the European and Southeast Asian side – and to what extent these parties were aware of their different understandings of what sovereignty implied or entailed. Parallel to the evolving political concepts in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe (where the actual understandings of the term were by no means uniform or homogenous at the time), we have in insular and peninsular Southeast Asia an interplay of ideas and values on terms like *kedaulatan* (divine right to rule, or power associated with royal rule), *kerajaan* (the felicitous state of having a king), *negeri* (settlement, polity), *kuasa* (supreme temporal authority), *kekayaan* (wealth), *nama* (rank, status, reputation), and *belanja* (expenses, costs, outlays, spending money).[49] In pre-colonial Southeast Asia, and specifically in the maritime world of the Indonesian archipelago, much value was placed on the ability of a ruler (or contender to power) to attract and retain trade and followers *(nama,* tributary relations).[50] Divine attributes were important, as the ruler held the community together with ritual, ceremony, as well as *keadilan* (justice, fairness, circumspection, generosity) and *adat.*[51] The *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), the single most important work of Malay literature, succinctly encapsulates the relationship between these expressions with the brief statement: "Where there is *pedang kerajaan* (the sword of the *kerajaan)*, there is gold."[52] Having a *raja* enabled political and social order, the administration of justice and fairness, attracted wealth and prosperity, and thus enabled their redistribution by the *raja.* Without a *raja,* as the late seventeenth century Malay *Hikayat Hang Tuah* emphasizes, property serves no purpose *(guna).*[53] Such conceptual interlinkages and associations have also been variously discussed in the works

48 This is the topic of a study by Timothy P. Barnard, *Multiple Centres of Authority: Society and Environment in Siak and Eastern Sumatra, 1674–1827* (Leiden: KILTV Press, 2003).

49 See William Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), esp. 2–3. Also Tony Day, "A Primer of Malay Political Culture," *Asian Studies Association of Australia Review* 7/1 (1983): 90–97 (This is a review article focusing on Milner's book *Kerajaan).* Today the term *kerajaan* is broadly understood as equivalent to "government" and is sometimes also used as synonym for "kingdom" or "ruler".

50 Concerning rulers who attract trade to their shores, see Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 9, 42, 413, 428, 486; Teeuw and Wyatt, *Hikayat Patani*, 78.

51 Concerning the divine attributes of Malay rulers in the pre-colonial period, see Milton Osborne, *Southeast Asia: An Introductory History* (Singapore: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 39–45 and the older but still useful study by Richard O. Winstedt, *The Malays: A Cultural History* (Singapore: Kelly & Walsh, 1947), 129–139.

52 Charles C. Brown, trans., "The Malay Annals," *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 25/2–3 (1952), 187.

53 Ahmad, *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, 70.

of Leonard Andaya, Tony Day, Jane Drakard, Pierre-Yves Manguin, Tony Milner, and Tony Reid.[54] But more research would be needed on terms such as *aib* (dishonour), *hina* (insult), *dendam* (revenge), and *kemarahan* (anger) for understanding motivation, political mentalités, and how these in turn engendered the basis for treaties and alliance-making of the Malay rulers with Western powers. Johor's early alliance with the Dutch was evidently the brainchild of Raja Bongsu,[55] and his motivation for initiating and forging initial contacts with the Dutch were driven primarily by his desire to augment *nama* and expunge dishonour *(aib, malu),* or even to take revenge, and not by considerations of gaining more money or wealth. In May 1606, Raja Bongsu wrote a letter to Admiral Cornelis Matelieff telling him that by helping Johor avenge the Portuguese, the admiral's "name and fame will deserve to be spread around the whole world".[56] The assumption is that Matelieff was militarily intervening for the sake of augmenting his *nama.* More evidence derives from a letter that Raja Bongsu addressed to the "king of Holland" and passed to Admiral Pieter Willemsz. Verhoeff in February 1609. In this, he explained the origins of Johor's conflict with Patani and requests for military assistance in a future joint campaign, repeatedly emphasizing across the letter the need to expunge the "dishonour and shame" so unjustly inflicted on Johor and its royal family by the ruler of Patani.[57] This episode offers a textbook example of how a given Malay ruler was attempting to co-opt and mobilize the Dutch in his power plays by emphasizing values, qualities, and objectives that were specific to their own cultural milieu.

The early letters from the Johor court also reveal something else: During the first decades of the seventeenth century, the Johor kings viewed the Dutch very much in the same way as they would have regarded rival Malay kings and princes, namely as tools or instruments for politically repositioning themselves in the hierarchy of rulers. The Dutch were also seen as allies (real and potential) for avenging one's enemies. The Johor rulers regarded the European powers, including the Dutch, as just another actor who had entered the local scene. Rules that governed conflict and personal relations were still dominated by Malay cultural forms. The Europeans sought to engage and understand this world, but as explained, they also found these challenging to untangle and decode. The assumption

54 Milner, *The Malays*; Leonard Y. Andaya and Barbara W. Andaya, *History of Malaysia,* second edition (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001); Andaya, *Leaves of the Same Tree*; Day, *Fluid Iron*; Drakard, *A Kingdom of Words;* Pierre-Yves Manguin, "The Merchant and the King: Political Myths of Southeast Asian Coastal Polities," *Indonesia* 52 (1991): 41–54, esp. 47; Anthony Milner, "Identity Monarchy: Interrogating Heritage for a Divided Malaysia," *Southeast Asian Studies* 1/2 (2012): 191–212.

55 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials,* 442–443.

56 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials*, 152.

57 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials,* 441–445.

among imperial historians had long been that the Malay rulers were afraid of the Europeans. The evidence at hand dating from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, shows that the Malays may not have been as well armed (and these arms may not have been as well deployed) as their European counterparts. However, the military prowess of the Europeans was confined to artillery power at sea and that range of power was generally limited to a few hundred metres inland – in other words, the proverbial distance of a cannon shot.[58] The situation on land of course was very different. Here, the Europeans were subject to the rules, systems, values, and mentalités that favoured the agency and the initiatives of the Malay rulers or their high-ranking dignitaries such as the *bendahara* (chief minister, grand vizier, "rijksbestuurder"), *penghulu bendahari* (treasurer, "tesorier"), *laksamana* (admiral, captain-major of the sea), *temenggong* ("chief of police" and judge), or *shahbandar* (port master). The sources at hand evidence that it was uncertainty and distrust, and not primarily fear, that shaped the early relations between the Europeans and, say, Johor. This should not surprise, for the relationship was recent and the parties needed to familiarize themselves with the other. This offers a sharp contrast to the situation at the eve of British and Dutch imperialism in the nineteenth century when Malay rulers and their high-ranking dignitaries were regarded as reluctant respondents to European impulses. Tony Milner described this phenomenon, which he calls *Colonial Records History,* with reference to British Malaya in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[59]

According to Milner colonial records histories generally emphasize European initiative and action and juxtapose these to Southeast Asian responses, as a result of which Southeast Asian agency becomes considerably downplayed. This problem has of course been recognized by other scholars working with sources on Southeast Asia. The debates are perhaps best summarized in the chapter by John Legge in the *Cambridge History of Southeast Asia,* but there are also other engagements with the more specific issues in the older studies by John Smail and Harry Benda, as well as in a more recent chapter by Ariel Heryanto.[60] Source

58 What Charles H. Alexandrowicz wrote with reference to the Portuguese also holds true for the other, pre-1800 European colonial powers as well. See Alexandrowicz, *An Introduction to the History of the Law of Nations in the East Indies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 14, "They [i.e. the Portuguese] did not in principle penetrate inland but secured their position by the conclusion of treaties with local sovereigns."

59 Anthony Milner, "Colonial Records History: British Malaya," *Modern Asian Studies* 21/4 (1987): 782–783.

60 John Legge, "The Writing of Southeast Asian History," *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia,* ed. Nicholas Tarling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), vol. 1, 1–50; John R.W. Smail, "On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 2 (1961): 72–102; Harry J. Benda, "The Structure of Southeast Asian History: Some Preliminary Observations," *Journal of*

materials have come under scrutiny from present-day researchers who lament how Southeast Asian rulers were largely seen as responding—most reluctantly—to the superior military might and commercial prowess of the European imperial powers. These reluctant responses resulted in unequal treaties that were imposed on Southeast Asian rulers and societies. These agreements blatantly favoured their European counterparts, agents, and proxies.

Republican liberty in Southeast Asia? The case of Banda and Ambon

In an earlier section, it was explained that the Dutch faced some difficulties in presenting themselves at the courts of the Asian rulers, first because badmouthing by the Iberians required damage control, and second, because they found it genuinely challenging, if not counter-productive, to explain their republican form of government to their Asian hosts. So it should hardly surprise that in a world of *rajas, shahs, patis, adipatis, ketuas*, and *yang di pertuans* that the Dutch were searching for what could be deemed kindered spirits: people who did not regard monarchy as the best or only acceptable form of government, and who might in one way or another, display certain republican ideals, institutions or forms. And the Dutch found them – or at least thought they had found them – on Banda and Ambon. When the Dutch arrived in the late sixteenth century, the Banda Islands had shaken off their allegiance to Ternate and therefore no longer recognized a single ruler. The islands were governed instead by a group of local leaders whom the Dutch initially recognized and with whom they signed treaties as "kings", but subsequently labelled as *orang kaya*. With a stretch of the imagination, some early observers came to recognize in Banda a distorted reflection of the Dutch Republic in Southeast Asia: the islands had shaken off the rule of the king of Ternate, and the various local leaders ruled the settlements and islands as a confederation. The kingless islands may have evoked the admiration of the Dutch, but to the local rulers they were an abomination, a manifestation of of *huru hara,* of chaos and disorder. The ruler of Tuban on Java is on record exclaiming that if the Dutch or the Portuguese did not seize the Bandas by force, he would step in do it himself.[61] The Dutch wanted to recognize similar republican conditions prevailing on the island of Ambon after they seized the Portuguese fortress there in 1605. Republican language and terminology is also evident from

Southeast Asian History 3/1 (1962): 106–138; Ariel Heryanto, "Can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?," in *Knowing Southeast Asian Subjects,* ed. Laurie J. Sears (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 75–108, esp. what he has to say on agency on pp. 97–98.

61 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials,* 262.

the way the Dutch began to refer to the people. In his memorials addressed to the VOC directors in Amsterdam and to senior government officials of the Dutch Republic, Admiral Cornelis Matelieff wrote on several instances of the "citizens" of Ambon and Banda, not of "subjects". He was thinking about co-opting them into a(n evolving) Dutch plan to oust the Iberians from the Spice Islands and seize control of them, but he also had his reservations about acquiring Muslim subjects since the Dutch had no experience governing them.[62]

The evolution (or should one better say, deliberate manipulation) of how the Dutch formally defined their contractual counter-parties makes for a rewarding topic of investigation. Wolphert Hermansz., one of the early fleet commanders before the founding of the VOC, signed a treaty with Banda on 23 May 1602. In this, he identified his counter-party as "four kings and their respective allies".[63] He signed another treaty a few weeks later, on 17 June 1602, and in this document, the counter-party is identified in very vague terms: "those of Pulau Ai in the *kampung* (settlement) of Ouratt."[64] Steven van der Hagen concluded a treaty of 25 February, 1605, with the *patih* of Oma whom he titles "king" in this instance. A few months later, on 13 July 1605, Van der Hagen also forged a treaty with Banda. This time however, the counter-party is defined as the "overheijt en principalen van 't landt Banda" (the government and leaders of the land of Banda).[65] The pattern is already becoming clear: local leaders were initially upgraded to the rank and status of "king", but within a short time, the Dutch claimed that they were signing treaties with a government, a people, and a unified land or territory (the land of Banda). Here the Dutch were signing treaties with states and peoples, not with rulers in their personal capacity. They were concluding treaties, in other words, with republics. Ambon's and Banda's republican myth was thus already well in the making: Subsequent treaties identified the counter-party as the "overicheit ende raden van de eijlanden van Banda" (the government and councillors of the islands of Banda),[66] the "overheijdt van de steden en landen van Banda" (the government of the cities and lands of Banda)[67] or the "seer vermaerde orancaijen van alle de eijlanden, steden ende leden van gansch Banda" (the very honourable orang kaya from all the islands, cities, and [constituent] parts of all Banda).[68] The treaties with Ambon, too, began to fea-

62 Borschberg, *Journal Memorials,* letter dat. 31 Aug., 1610, 348.
63 Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 23.
64 Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 25.
65 Treaty of 13 Jul. 1605, Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 36.
66 Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 39.
67 Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 36.
68 Treaty of 10 Aug., 1609, Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 67. For similar terminology, see also the treaties with Banda of 3 May, 1616, ibid., p. 122; 30 Ap., 1617, ibid., 128; 25 Jun., 1618, ibid., 134.

ture distinctly republican terminology. The two agreements signed on 13 March and 26 April 1609 identify their counter-party as "vier negrijen op 't Eiland Oma" (four *negeri* on the island of Oma)[69] and "de volkeren van de negry Roemakay" (the people of the *negeri* Rumakai).[70] The selection of terminology is important here, for these are probably the first instances that the Malay political expression *negeri* shows up in a surviving Dutch-language copy of an official treaty.

Granted, as has been seen earlier in the case of the Dutch-Banda treaty of June 1602, another Malay word *kampung* had been adopted into the Dutch text. This refers to a type of rural settlement of minor significance. This is not a word that is unique to Malay and is commonly used today in Thailand and Cambodia as well. But the term *negeri* bears deep political connotations and what it exactly refers to in any given text or document is often a source of confusion. It can have several meanings, and this could be the reason why the author or translator of the 1609 treaty decided to retain the original Malay expression rather than translate it. In its contemporary usage, *negeri* means the (sovereign) nation or state. In its original and most basic meaning, however, the term simply refers to a settlement, large or small.[71] When the treaty with Banda spoke of the counter-party being the "government of the cities and [constituent] parts of Banda", the terms "steden" or "steden ende leden" (cities, cities and parts) almost certainly represents a translation of the Malay expression *negeri.* It gets more complex. Milner has noted that the expression *isi negeri* means "the population", reminding readers that the substance of the *negeri* is not land or even (royal) institutions, but people.[72] Whoever drafted or copied the treaty of April 1609 grasped that term entailed conceptual complexity, for the agreement is said to have been forged with the people of the *negeri,* or their representatives (the *orang kaya*), and not with a "king" as stated in earlier treaties. The problem with the term *negeri,* however, is that it is translated as "kingdom" or "state". The question arises as to what extent Dutch treaties and legal documents might have erased the original complexity of the term to redefine *negeri* from a settlement of unspecified magnitude and make it into a *political* unit. This seems to be a trend that blurred the original meaning of this term, and as a consequence, intentionally or unintentionally upgraded settlements identified as *negeri* to full-fledged states or kingdoms, perhaps even imagining them as territorially-defined entities, which clearly they were not.[73]

69 Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 58.
70 Tiele and Heeres, *Bouwstoffen*, 60.
71 Milner, *The Malays*, 59, John M. Gullick, *Indigenous*, 21.
72 Milner, *The Invention of Politics*, 104; Milner, *The Malays*, 59.
73 Milner, *The Malays,* 59, "The substance of the *negeri,* however, was neither the land nor the institutions – it was simply the people." Andaya, *Leaves,* 80, "The boundaries of these Melayu polities were never stable because they expanded or contracted

This was to have serious consequences for our understanding of this term. A case in point is John Gullick who defined the *negeri* as "typically the basin of a large river or (less often) a group of adjacent rivers, forming a block of land extending from the coast inland to the central watershed. The capital of the state [i.e. *negeri*] was the point at which the main river ran into the sea".[74] What he describes here is a collection of settlements along rivers and their tributaries that form the backbone of a *negeri* understood as a state, kingdom or polity. The administrative and trading centre was typically at or near the sea with the upstream settlements forming the hinterland.

The *negeri* mentioned in the early Dutch treaties with Ambon and Banda were nothing like an expansive network of settlements along rivers that Gullick has described. The question is: What *did* they represent? Did the seventeenth-century translation of *negeri* as "city" conjure up images of city governments in, say, the province of Holland that were the bastions of republican government and also represented in the provincial estates? Or perhaps one was thinking about the free imperial or Hanseatic cities in the Holy Roman Empire, which, again, were bastions of republican government? Or were the Dutch simply unable to translate the expression because there was no short way of rendering the multi-dimensionality and complexity that this term *negeri* originally entailed? One thing is for sure, in the early seventeenth century, the Dutch thought they had indeed spotted all sorts of institutional and conceptual parallels of a republican sort on Ambon and the Bandas. Paradoxically, rather than serving the purpose of strengthening liberty as might be expected, the republican discourses about Ambon and Banda intellectually paved the way for their conquest and annexation. If the Dutch were routinely upgrading rulers to the status of "king" in order to secure a contract with them, on Ambon they are consistently downgrading the cultural and political status of the local leaders and the local people. The treaty of 1609 and of 16 November 1616 still addressed Ambon's leaders in Hitu as *orang kaya*. As will be recalled, this was the identical expression used by the Dutch to partially translate the Gentlemen States General into Malay. The treaty of 16 May 1617 further downgraded the local leaders to "oversten" (chieftains).[75] By 17 June 1633, it was formally claimed that the "ingezetenen" (natives) of Hitu had "vrywillig [...] onderworpen en verbonden" (voluntarily submitted and allied themselves) to the Dutch States General and the VOC.[76] With this the cornerstone of a territorially defined Dutch empire in Southeast Asia had been set.

in accordance with the movements of their subjects." Also Maziar Mozaffari Falarti, *Malay Kingship*, esp. 11.

74 Gullick, *Indigenous,* 21.

75 Gullick, *Indigenous*, 126, 130.

76 Gullick, *Indigenous*, 258.

Concluding thoughts

This chapter has addressed issues regarding language, terms, institutions, and titles that went through a process that could be dubbed a culturally adjusted translation: authors deliberately or subconsciously adapted and adjusted their terminology to meet specific preconditions or accommodate target audiences. It involves a close and careful reading of the original documents, letters, and treaties with a focus on the choice and evolution of key terminology.

When the Dutch arrived in Southeast Asia and began concluding treaties with rulers across Asia, what sort of rulers were treating with them, and how did they perceive the Dutch? The Dutch spoke of the equal status of sovereign rulers and showed a propensity to label most overlords as kings. That appealed greatly to rulers who found themselves at the lower end of the Asian hierarchy of rulers. It was not the actual idea of equality that appealed to them, but the fact that an alliance with a strong power like the Dutch would augment their *nama* and help lift their status within the hierarchy of rulers. When we examine the pattern of treaties signed between the Dutch and Southeast Asian rulers at the beginning of the seventeenth century, it is clear that the majority were not with the powerful kingdoms of mainland Southeast Asia such as Siam and Pegu (Burma). It would be overly simplistic and also cynical to dismiss all these Euro-Asian treaties of the early seventeenth century as instruments to enshrine political inequality, to dismiss them as unequal treaties, or even as mere scraps of paper that no one ever intended to honour. It would also be fallacious to assume that the Dutch simply imposed themselves on their Southeast Asian counterparts by force. Sometimes, as was notably in the case of Johor, it was the locals who had first approached and later co-opted the Dutch, and not the other way round.

This paper has forensically dissected and historicized certain key terms and identified the contexts or patterns in which they were employed. The choice of terminology is of particular interest, as a story can be told about underlying assumptions, contexts, and objectives. Some terms were consciously manipulated, such as notably the use of the title king where the Dutch upgraded or downgraded rulers depending on the objectives of a given document or agreement. Some expressions could not translated—or at least not easily—while others were problematic because of an underlying rift in understanding of certain ideas and values. The story behind the "king of Holland" exemplifies this particularly well and also demonstrates how concepts were culturally translated and adjusted to render them more acceptable to Asian audiences and readers.

The early treaties and agreements forged by the VOC in Asia can be regarded as part of an on-going political and cultural dialogue, as an act of bridging, assimilating, or integrating. It is thus imperative to differentiate treaties more vigorously across the *longue durée* and to ascertain more precisely the point in

time when Southeast Asian rulers began to espouse and adopt characteristically European concepts, such as for example the idea of sovereignty and implicitly territoriality.

If control over people (and not land) was the focus in local understandings of sovereignty, there remains of course the issue of land ownership. In the nineteenth century, considerable emphasis was placed on the issue of land ownership, as the British in Malaya, for example, sought concessions from local rulers to set up plantations or exploit the Peninsula's mineral wealth by developing mining operations. Arguments can – and have – been advanced to explain that Europeans conveniently took the local ruler to be the implicit owner of all land. This was a convenient means of securing a contract or concession from these rulers who could not fully appreciate what they were conceding or under what conditions this was being made. Others may argue that by the beginning of the nineteenth century, Malay rulers had largely appropriated, or at least accommodated, European understandings of kingship and territorial overlordship. What this article shows is that during the early modern period, the Europeans, specifically the Dutch, and their Southeast Asian counter-parties, were literally and metaphorically far apart. The Dutch were aware of this and some creative license was required to bridge the divide.

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