White and Dark Stranger Kings: Kupang in the Early Colonial Era

Etrangers rois – blancs et bruns : Kupang aux débuts de l’époque coloniale

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INTRODUCTION
In September 1658 the Dutch fort at Kupang had existed for more than five years. While its presence in the waters of Solor and Timor went back to 1613, the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) had only decided to settle on the island itself in early 1653, beseeched by the desperate king of the Helong tribe. The fear of the might of the Portuguese, who had emerged as a dominating force on the unruly island since many years, motivated the king and the Company to join forces. From a rocky height at the shore of the Kupang Bay, the less than two hundred Company soldiers who inhabited the modest Fort Concordia monitored the shipping to and from Rote, Sawu, and Solor, the other cornerstones of the VOC strategy in these waters. The profits to be made were not overwhelming, for the main attraction of Timor, the fragrant sandalwood, could only be obtained in small amounts. On the other hand, Solor and Timor lay on the way to the more vital VOC possessions of Banda and Ambon, and it was always a good thing to keep an eye on what the Portuguese were up to, with whom the United Provinces were in a state of war since 1651. The Dutch newcomers lived very much on the margin, restricted as they were to the tiny area in westernmost Timor inhabited by the Helong. For a while the fortunes of the Noble Company seemed to receive a boost, when the two important

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kingdoms of Sonba’i and Amabi suddenly chose to leave their erstwhile allies, the ethnically mixed Portuguese, for the white foreigners in Kupang. However, a series of very humiliating military defeats in 1655, 1656, and 1657 convinced the Dutch that their time had not yet come. Defeatism was rampant, and some Company servants thought of moving to the turbulent but well provided island of Rote (Coolhaas 1968: 14-5, 89-90).

This September the local Dutch commander Joseph Margits accompanied the Company servant Hendrick ter Horst to the Solor Islands. The two of them did not get along smoothly – Ter Horst did not hesitate to characterise Margits as a drunkard who played around with the garrison and who was therefore utterly unfit as a leader. On Solor some Muslim merchants came aboard the ship of Margits and suggested to be allowed to pick up Dutch merchandise to the value of 1244,8 reals, for which they promised to buy sandalwood and beeswax on Timor’s inaccessible and dangerous south coast, and deliver a certain amount to the VOC post in Kupang. Margits promised to consider it when back in the fortress. With these routine matters in mind he finally returned to the roadstead of Kupang on September 21, delayed by the doldrums. As soon as he arrived, the bookkeeper Philip Boels boarded his ship and related the startling news that had occurred during his absence.

On September 11, the pace of life in Kupang was radically changed by the arrival of a train of refugees. Hounded by the Portuguese and their clients, a large part of the inhabitants of Sonba’i and Amabi broke up from their settlements in the interior of West Timor. As they marched down to the coast, the enemy troops swarmed around, shouting that they would sit no safer in Kupang than in their old lands. With their women, children, cattle and all they could bring along, they camped a few kilometres from the fortress “like a swarm of bees”. Their number was estimated at 8,000-9,000 souls according to Boels, or 18,000-20,000 according to Ter Horst, and it was a truly miserable sight.

Boels met the refugee leaders at the hillside above the Company stronghold. Both groups had recently lost their ruling princes; the so-called “emperor” of Sonba’i had been captured by the Portuguese while the Amabi king had fallen from the steep rocks of Gunung Mollo with many of his subjects when attacked by the enemy. The main spokesman for the newcomers was Ama Tomnanu, the executive regent (“field commander”) within the diarchic rulership structure of Sonba’i. Ama Tomnanu and the Amabi princes all looked sombre with tears in their eyes. They complained to the Dutch of their hunger, since they had nothing to eat, and asked for rice. Boels declined the request, seeing no means to feed such a large amount of people. They insisted, however, and finally the leading princes were given 100 pounds of rice each, for which they seemed very grateful.

The Company now provided the immigrants with cutlasses and axes, and ordered their allies on Solor and Rote to bring in beans, rice and palm sugar on a daily basis. The refugees immediately started to make plantations on the dry ground close to Kupang that actually belonged to the Helong, cultivating 

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bodies each day along the roads or under the palisade of the VOC fortress. Timorese who ventured too far away from the fort might be trapped and killed by the patrols of the Portuguese clients. Still, the new settlement persisted and finally thrived. Sonba’i, Amabi and the Helong kingdom of Kupang remained subordinate allies of the Company henceforth, and were in due time joined by two other refugee groups, Amfo’an (1683) and Taebenu (1688). The five allies existed as separate entities or landschappen until the twentieth century.

And the Muslim traders who had received trading goods from Margits to barter at the Timorese coast? As they lay at Matayer in East Timor with the intention to purchase sandalwood and beeswax, they were attacked by Portuguese vessels coming down from Makassar. Two ships were destroyed and fourteen men lost their lives, while the captain and fifteen men managed to save themselves and sail for Solor, “which”, to quote Ter Horst, “did not give us any pleasant tidings”. The hard fate of the merchants was yet a reminder that the VOC and their few allies were stuck together on a small piece of land for the foreseeable future.

For the student of early colonialism, the relation between the Dutch and their Timorese allies in the Kupang area is interesting in several ways. Although the relation lasted for three centuries, there are very few cases of rebellious acts against the Dutch leadership among the five original allies – in complete contrast with the principalities under Portuguese sway, or those who acknowledged the Dutch after 1749. A white stranger lord, prestigious but with limited resources at hand, gained acceptance by non-violent means from Timorese rajahs who were for the most parts themselves strangers to the land where they settled. In this article I will study a number of aspects of interaction between the Company and the five allies. The wealth of Dutch documents permits us to follow the intercourse in some detail, and shows how political and economic routines of reciprocity were built up and maintained. Meanwhile, Timorese oral tradition gives important hints of how such relations were viewed in a posthumous perspective, and how the white strangers were incorporated in a local discourse. All this might elucidate early colonialism as a process which often built on bargaining and partnership rather than a one-sided rule by force. The term “early colonial” in this context corresponds to the VOC era from the 1650s to the 1790s.

A LATER PERSPECTIVE

Timorese groups have, historically speaking, generally been illiterate. They do possess, however, a rich (though presently declining) oral tradition. The preservation of stories tied to a particular group was to a large extent an affair of the ruling aristocracy. Any local raja would have at his side a speaker or tradition expert, called mafeja in the West Timorese Dawan language, whose task it was to represent the raja and to preserve the body of information handed over to him by his predecessor. These stories usually have an emphasis on the early origins of the polity. They tell about the circumstances under which a group or its ruling aristocracy came to inhabit a particular land. A recurrent theme of many origin stories is the stranger king theme. An enterprising figure in a remote past arrives...
from another part of Timor or from another land. He gains acceptance as the legitimate authority of the polity, being acknowledged by the ancestors of the major chiefs. The stranger king often wields authority in a ritual opposition to an original “lord of the land” whose lineage co-exists with that of the outsider ruler. In this way, hierarchy and precedence in a given community is established through the reference to a legendary (but in a way very real) past. As is well known from the research of Marshall Sahlins and others, variations on this mythical theme are found in many places in Southeast Asia and Polynesia (Sahlins 1981; Van Wouden 1968: 119; Fox 1995). David Henley (2002) has shown that the stranger kings theme is also relevant for the study of stateless societies who acknowledged Europeans as overlords. Local chiefs in northern Sulawesi in the late seventeenth century and later saw the Dutch foreigners as a means of controlling internal conflicts and achieve impartial adjudication. The authority of the Dutch was not in the first place dependent on the use of brute force, and the VOC troops deployed to northern Sulawesi were quite limited; from that point of view it was not a one-sided colonial rule.

With all this in mind, it is interesting to see how the contemporary VOC reports of Dutch-Timorese relations compare with oral stories written down later. In December 1901 the fettor (executive regent) of Amabi concluded a “relation of this land, its appearance and origins, of the grandees and princes who lived and flourished in this land, the Island of Timor [Pulu Timol], namely the golden and the silver ones.” (Middelkoop 1952: 197). The relation contains a number of oral stories, partly but not solely about the Kingdom of Amabi, which arrived to Kupang in 1658. A long section is devoted to the coming of the Dutch.

The text initially sets out the genealogical roots of the Amabi kingship. In ancient times there was but one ruler of the island, namely Liulai of Wewiku-Wehali in south central Timor. He sired two sons, Kamanasa Liulai and Belu Liulai who shared the land between them. Kamanasa Liulai settled at Lifau on the north coast and sired two sons in his turn, Abi and Sonba’i. They were the ancestors of the rajas of Amabi and of the “emperors” of the prestigious Sonba’i polity. Later on the text relates that Kupang was originally lorded by Nai Abi, the Amabi raja. Due to some misdeed a chief called Nai Besi escaped from his original land and went to Kupang at a time when Nai Abi was absent. With his fearful headhunting manners he scared the local chiefs Nai Kofan and Nai Tabun to pay him red coral, silver coins, meat and foodstuff. They finally offered Nai Besi to rule their lands, which he did in spite of initial opposition from another Timorese raja, Nai Lasi. In the year “1460” the black strangers (kase metan), meaning the Portuguese mestiço population dominant in the region, arrived. With the help of Nai Besi and Nai Lasi they established a fortress, which was given the name Konkordia. After that a number of groups and aristocrats arrived to settle in Kupang: Malekas (the mardijkers), Fonai, Baki To Amnanu (of Sonba’i), Nai Talan (of Amabi) and finally Nai Abi himself.
“In later days a ship came from Lamaker [on Solor] to Kupang; it was said that they were driven there by the wind. When the grandees saw him [the captain] they asked, ‘What news do you bring? What is your name? Where do you come from?’ The man answered, ‘I catch fish with the hook, my name is Maudasi, I come from Lamaker.’ He then told the grandees, ‘We there are ruled by the white foreigners [kase muti]; they are our friends. We from Solor, Lamaker, Trong, Lamahala and Adonara, we grandees and our wives, we acknowledge them as lords. They made a fortress there in Lawayong, they gave the fortress the name of Bellen [Willem]; all is very good, nothing is missing.’ Then the grandees agreed that [Maudasi] would go and fetch them, so that they together could acknowledge them as their lord” (Middelkoop 1952: 223).

The two chiefs, Nai Talan from Amabi and Oematan from Sonba’i, sailed to Solor together with Maudasi to act as envoys. Two months later they returned with mother and father Company (aina ama Compania). When arriving to the shore of Kupang, they were met by the black foreigners who asked what the whites were up to. The Dutchmen answered that they were there for trade. “Then the grandees went aboard the ship. They ate and drank together with father and mother, they talked and parleyed, for they agreed that they would acknowledge them as father and mother, as prince and chief (naina naama, nausi nanak), from the rising to the setting sun” (Middelkoop 1952: 227).

The black strangers naturally disputed the alliance between the inhabitants of Kupang and the Dutch. After various threats and preparations, they assembled a large army, about a decade after the coming of the white strangers. With tens of thousands of Belunese, Timorese (Atonis), Larantukeiros and Oecusseans, they attacked the Dutch allies at Penfui. However, within short the entire Portuguese army had perished in the battle; “Thus the lord of heaven really loved and assisted father and mother Olanit [the Hollanders] and all the grandees and mardijkers” (Middelkoop 1952: 229).

While most elements of this story can be shown to have a historical background, they are arranged in a way that bears little relation to the actual chronology. Nai Besi, or Ama Besi, was a minor lord who went to settle among the Helong on Pulau Semau in July 1653, fearful of Portuguese aggression. Ama Besi later became the leading raja of the Helong kingdom of Kupang, in 1660. All this, however happened under the auspices of the VOC, who established their fortress in early 1653. Likewise, the Sonba’i and Amabi groups only came there later, not to speak about the mardijkers who were actually Christian people of colour in Company service. Finally, the indeed remarkable battle of Penfui took place on 9 November 1749, thus almost a century later than the Dutch establishment.

Read in another way, the oral account contains interesting perspectives of the past historical landscape. The Amabi and Sonba’i lords are stranger kings, not only in Kupang, but in the Atoni context as well; their origins lie in the ritual centre of Wewiku-Wehali in Belu, in Central Timor. The title liurai (Liulai) is nowadays borne by any East Timorese raja, but was originally associated with Wewiku-Wehali, the Timor-wide prominence of which can be historically traced back to the early sixteenth century.
Moreover, Amabi’s association with Kupang is accentuated by the claim of an early suzerainty over the place, long before the establishment of the black and the white foreigners. The rather awkward circumstances of the coming of Sonba’i and Amabi in 1658 have been reversed by the assertion that their representatives were the active parts inviting the white foreigners to settle in Kupang. The envoy Nai Talan or Amtaran was the hereditary executive regent of the Amabi diarchy, while Nai Abi was the passive part, the ceremonial king.

Finally, the white foreigners are described in brief but enthusiastic terms. They lord over a good community in Solor, and are perceived as a better bet than the black foreigners. The Company becomes the father and mother of the indigenous groups, and the new alliance finds heavenly approval as the might of the vengeful Portuguese is destroyed. By forging a new chain of causality, the three historical events of 1653, 1658, and 1749 are made into manifestations of the establishment of the white stranger lords. In conclusion, the Amabi account traces two lines of legitimacy, one pertaining to Timorese kingship and one to an external non-Timorese entity.

** Arenas of Interaction**

In this and other oral accounts of Dutch-Timorese relations, the Company often takes the function of a structurally ordering principle. The names and actions of individual Dutch *opperhoofden* or residents are seldom remembered, but the Company is rather a collective “he”. Actually the Dutch colonial establishment continued to be called “the Company” well into the twentieth century, long after the VOC had been formally liquidated (1799). This “institutionalised” image of the Company makes it essential to look at the channels between the VOC administration and the Timorese polities who lived in the Kupang area. How did the Dutch develop institutions or arenas of interaction that were successful enough to cement the alliances made in the 1650s?

The contacts were – at least as far as Sonba’i and Amabi went – inaugurated by a ritual alliance. On July 2 1655 – thus three years before the exodus to Kupang – a contract was concluded with the VOC, in which the participants drank each other’s blood, mixed in a cup. By this Timorese rite, the contract was to be “sacrosanctly followed, maintained and kept by all our subjects as unbreakable” (Corpus II: 75-77). The rajas promised to obey the Dutch requirements, fight the Company’s enemies, abstain from trading with the latter, assist in the erection of Company fortresses, and readily sell provisions to the Company servants. The Dutch, as it seems, were perceptive enough to grasp the great importance of such ritual alliances, and found reason to ignore the pagan aspects of the rite. The VOC made a great number of written contracts with Southeast Asian rulers, which was an important foundation for its political and commercial network. The durability of such a contract would obviously be enhanced by co-opting the local perceptions of alliance and precedence.⁸
The number of whites in Kupang was minute, and initially restricted to the garrison of the fortress, Fort Concordia. By and by, however, Kupang developed into a small town. White, mixed, and Chinese merchants made a modest living on the trade with sandalwood, beeswax, honey, turtle-shell and slaves. These merchants went to the other VOC dependencies, Rote, Savu, and the Solor Islands, but also to Ende on Flores and to Alor. Warfare between the United Provinces and Portugal was terminated by the peace in 1661-63, which enabled the Company traders to purchase the precious sandalwood in other Timorese ports on the courtesy of the Topasses or ethnically mixed Portuguese (Roever 2002: 282). From the horizon of Batavia, the hub of the Company, Kupang was a regular minus post, at least in the seventeenth century. The fear of seeing their allies being overtaken by the Portuguese and the need to secure the lines of communications with Banda and Ambon nevertheless motivated a continuing VOC presence in the western corner of Timor.

The governance of the post was entrusted to an opperhoofd appointed by Batavia. By his side was a council consisting of a scribe and a few other trusted persons. From the preserved reports we get the impression that the interaction between the council and the Timorese grandees took place on an ad hoc basis in the first decades of Dutch presence. A raja would visit Fort Concordia to tell the Dutch of one incident or another. At times, the opperhoofd would invite the rajas inside the fortress for some work that needed to be undertaken, for example the felling of wood for a new palisade.9

Towards the late seventeenth century these contacts were institutionalised. In memorandums compiled from time to time by departing opperhoofden, it is made clear that the five allies normally tended their own business. Once a year, in about September, they would deliver produce to Fort Concordia, usually consisting of beeswax and sandalwood, which was transferred to Batavia on Dutch keels as a tribute or gift (schenckagie). This was accompanied by a letter of homage in the Malay language which was drawn up by the rajas with the help of a scribe. In return, Batavia sent commodities to the rajas according to the amount of produce it received; firearms, ammunition, textiles, buttons, etc. The reports by the opperhoofden make clear that this exchange was of prime concern to the local aristocracies, who would eagerly look forward to the return freight and the commodities. Apart from these deliveries there were no Dutch impositions of regular taxes, although corvée labour was imposed from time to time. The allies were expected to sell thirty pigs per raja and month to the garrison, and to deliver limestone and wood for construction work when necessary.10 Naturally the allies were also required to participate in military expeditions.

But aside from these forms of interchange, the Company also took on the function of a mediator. While the five allies were usually able to solve their internal problems, the opperhoofden identified a number of principal causes for disputes between or within the kingdoms. First, the so-called kingdoms contained small populations that could be counted in four-digit numbers. All this made the retention of manpower crucial for the local aristocrats. That one chief attracted
manpower from another and declined to restore them was actually the most common cause of conflict in the Kupang area. Similarly, cattle theft and vandalism – the deliberate damaging of water canals – could easily spill over into violence between the kingdoms. Secondly, mere accidents might ignite animosity. The cattle of one community might damage the crops in the field of another, or the highly inflammable houses might catch fire and damage other houses in the process. Thirdly, individual family affairs could become quite inflated matters. Especially the bridewealth was (and is) of prime importance in the traditional Timorese society, and the payment or restitution of such wealth sometimes caused conflicts. Fourthly, political disobedience was not uncommon within the Timorese kingdoms; a lesser temukung (chief) might refuse to obey his putative lawful overlord, either “abusing” his power for his own ends or being supported by some other raja or chief.

The Dutch observed that the Timorese, when they were unable to straighten out their own affairs, frequently turned to the Company, and asked them to mediate. The Dutch authorities therefore made it obligatory for the regents to appear at the Kupang council each month, in order to deliberate on their differences. The memorandums pointed out the necessity to keep this institution going, in order to preserve internal peace among the Timorese. In the archival materials from Kupang there is a large number of reports from such meetings or vergaderingen. These reports give a good insight in the workings of Dutch-Timorese relations; they reveal the forms of deliberation and the efforts to reach consensus among the five allies, but also the clashes of cultures which occasionally bred resentment on both sides.

The vergaderingen were held in a hall within the walls of the fortress, where everyone had his assigned seat. The Timorese principalities usually had a dual structure, so that a deliberately inactive, “female” ruler was seconded by an actively governing “male” regent (in later history known as fettor). More often than not, the principalities were represented at the meetings by these regents who took the actual decisions in consultation with the Dutch council. All sorts of matters were discussed, from the deposition of erring regents to routine matters about stealth and runaway slaves. The language of communication was Malay; the Dutch took precautions to educate the children of the aristocracy in this tongue already by 1659, and there is no indication that Dutch officials ever attempted to learn the local Helong and Dawan languages. The deliberations were conventionally concluded by drinking a glass of arrack as a symbol of concord. Ceremonial issues clearly had importance, and the grandees would urge the opperhoofd to arrange for salutes and military displays on important occasions. It is reasonable to assume that these Dutch displays of power and pomp reinforced the prestige of the rajas, as did the solemn bestowal of tongkat (ceremonial sticks with silver or golden knobs), drums, and halberds.

What was the position of the Timorese regents to negotiate solutions favourable to themselves and their respective kingdom? The reports, written by the VOC scribes, take some care to render the arguments of the regents in detail. Of course we do not know how faithfully these renderings actually were, but it nevertheless appears that the Company officials found it essential to know the Timorese
mindset. There are a number of recorded cases when the five allies bluntly refused to follow the recommendations of the opperhoofd and his council, and the vergadering was dissolved without having reached a consensus.

One of the most fateful disagreements took place in November 1711. Due to a conflict in the Portuguese sphere of influence, a large train of refugees from the interior of West Timor arrived to the vicinity of Kupang. A vergadering was quickly summoned by the opperhoofd, Reinier Leers, who attempted to forbid the regents and kings to receive the newcomers. With its tiny resources, the Company post in Kupang was disinclined to involve itself in the Portuguese political affairs, and was moreover discouraged by Batavia to do so. The opperhoofd said that the allies would have to suit themselves if they did not follow his well-intended advice. They could not count on assistance from the VOC, but should rather expect its displeasure. The Sonba’i regent answered that his people on the contrary would welcome the refugees, come what may. The story ended badly for both parts; the allies and the refugees were later attacked by the Portuguese and their clients, and the opperhoofd found himself the subject of severe criticism.

While the vergaderingen were the normal arena of discussion, there was also a narrow but real possibility to inform the Company authorities in Batavia if the local VOC servants in Kupang proved oppressive or incompetent. The yearly letter of homage by the five allies usually held a courteous and official tone, and their contents were probably scrutinised by the opperhoofden. On a few occasions, however, the allies were able to deliver letters directly to Batavia via envoys or otherwise. On one such occasion, in April 1713, the so-called “empress” of Sonba’i (r. 1682-1717) dictated a frank letter in the wake of the Portuguese attack:

“The ruler of the Sonba’i nation Nonje Sonba’i, with her secondary regents Nai Sau and Nai Domingo, as well as the regent of the Taebenus, Your Excellencies’ loyal allies, find themselves obliged to hand in these few paragraphs to Your Excellencies due to dire straits. This is otherwise not at all our custom. It is only in order to advertise the very bad conduct and governance of the Prefect Opperhooft, Mr. Reinier Leers. This [conduct] has never been seen among the previous Opperhoofden, as long as we have enjoyed the protection of the Company. Meanwhile, the lack of civility of the quoted Mr. Leers before the aforementioned Noni Sonba’i is unprecedented [?]. We will not tire out Your Excellencies with this story, which is too verbose. We also want to tell that about ten months ago, when there was some need of jagung [maize], we supplied the aforementioned Opperhoofd Leers with this grain, as much as our subjects could abstain, for 9 Sts. [Stuyvers?] per 40 pounds. When again we had to buy this grain for food, we had to buy it from the hand of the Opperhoofd for 18 Sts. per the same 40 pounds. This caused a great muttering among our peoples. For if they wished to stay alive they had to sell off almost everything in order to fill their bellies, so that a large part with wives and children again went over to the Portuguese. However, this is not the only reason [of discontent], but also the sharp words that the aforementioned Opperhoofd threw against us seven months ago: whenever we once again picked up a fight with our enemies, and [if we] happened to retreat under the fortress of the Company, then he would fire at us and not spare the people of the Company allies. Because of this and other atrocities that may come out of this, the said ruler requests Your Excellencies (in order to avoid such a sorry
occurrence), that if the Oppervoofd Leers stays here any longer, Your Excellencies in the coming year may allow her person [the empress] to come by way of the Company's ship, at her expenses, in order that she give Your Excellencies an oral account about things, since she is not at all of intention to be lodged with her arch enemies, the Portuguese in Lifau. However, if Your Excellencies do not wish to take the effort to provide the ship, then the aforementioned Nonje Sonba'i asks permission to depart from here with a good Chinese trading vessel."

The complaint of the empress bore fruit. The Company authorities in Batavia reacted by replacing Leers with a more amicable figure. Since the Portuguese dominated most of the island, the loyalty of the five small principalities by Kupang had to be retained. Although the United Provinces and Portugal were officially at peace since long, pro-Portuguese armed bands regularly clashed with the allies, sometimes coming close to Fort Concordia. The situation was therefore far from stable, and the Company needed the five Timorese principalities as a protective girdle. To sum up, there was a certain room for negotiation in Timorese-Dutch relations, and the local rajas and regents seem to have been well aware of the possibilities.

**THE COMPANY AS PEACE MAKER**

Apart from the Helong kingdom of Kupang, the other four allies were Atoni immigrants with their roots in other parts of Timor. The small populations were able to make a modest living in the relatively dry territory around Kupang and the principalities did usually not encroach on each other's lands or interests. Still there arose tension between them from time to time.

In particular the pretensions of Sonba'i gave rise to cumbersome situations. Sonba'i was the dynastic group in West Timor that was the highest in rank, which is clear from a plethora of later traditional accounts. The first, legendary Sonba'i lord was supposedly the brother of the Liurai of Wewiku-Wehali, and the various Atoni rulers related themselves genealogically to Sonba'i (Fobia 1984; Schulte Nordholt 1971: 262-306; Van Wouden 1968: 49-53). Significantly, the Sonba'i lord was known in the Dutch and Portuguese records as "emperor" (keizer, imperador), although the principality was split up in two entities after 1658, which adhered to the respective colonial suzerains. For the Company as well as the Portuguese, it was important to make use of the prestige that the name of Sonba'i carried.

When parts of the Amfo'an and Taebenu groups arrived to Kupang in the 1680s, the Sonba'i claimed them as subjects of old, and demanded them to perform ceremonial submission. The Amfo'an ruler complied in the name of diplomacy, but the Taebenu stubbornly refused. Some years later, in September 1705, Company servants who visited Taebenu were met by the grisly sight of some twenty mutilated bodies including women and children, who had been slaughtered by the Sonba'i group. With utmost effort the Company was able to stop further bloodletting.

Apart from this particular incident, the Company was generally able to stop the internal conflicts that threatened to break out, before they erupted in full-scale
violence. In the same year 1705, an aristocratic Sonba’i lady, who had been given in marriage to the King of Kupang, was spirited away from his residence by her fellow-countrymen since the king ignored her. The Sonba’is later let her appear in the attire of an unmarried woman at a feast where some Kupangese were present. Due to this mockery a Kupangese troop marched against Sonba’i to exact revenge. The Company servants, however, took immediate action, brought the parties to a halt and promised to bring about reconciliation at the next vergadering. This was fulfilled, and in the end the lady remained with Sonba’i while the King of Kupang got back the bride-price that he had paid for her.\(^1\)

What is remarkable in all this is not that tensions and occasional violence arose, but that the Company was regularly able to stop it. The reports repeatedly describe how armed troops, incited by some minor incident, were on their way to attack each other, but were talked to their senses by the Dutch. The relative absence of eruptions of internal violence seems to indicate that Dutch diplomacy as such was only half the story. Surrounded by hostile Portuguese clients, the allied Timorese knew fully well the potential consequences of a breakdown of the system, and tended to accept the Dutch as mediators. In that respect the latter were truly stranger kings, outsiders who held a social and political order in place.

**SOCIAL INTERACTION**

The Kupang post was at first a predominantly martial establishment. A small garrison was placed in the fort. On the eve of the Makassar War in 1667, the number of soldiers, sailors, doctors, craftsmen, etc. consisted of 157 men, but later decreased substantially.\(^2\) The fortress was surrounded by two palisades and Timorese people were not admitted apart from vergaderingen and special occasions. By and by, however, the settlement grew, and a multi-ethnic community arose during the eighteenth century around the estuary of the small river at the foot of the height where Fort Concordia is situated. While not an excellent harbour, Kupang was at least protected from the monsoon winds and currents that made much of Timor’s coastland dangerous to foreign visitors.

Relations between the Kupang population and the Timorese were rather ambiguous. The Timorese groups continued to live in their own communities not far from the fort, where they grew maize and beans. The number of Timorese who were integrated in the town community during the VOC period seems to have been limited, but not negligible. The preserved baptismal records suggest that few men but rather more women joined in. The Dutch employees, being usually unmarried at arrival, took local wives and concubines to an extent; such marriages required the approval from the Company authorities. After their service was over, the Dutch might settle as free burgers in Kupang, though this, too, required official approval. The records, however, indicate a preference for wives from Rote, who were traditionally valued for their fair complexion.\(^3\) In Kupang there were also a number of slaves, both private ones and Company-owned, who were probably for the most part Rotenese, Sawunese, and Solorese, rather than ethnic Timorese; the Company slaves were lodged in a particular slave house. On the other hand, it happened that

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\(^{1}\) Moussons 12, 2008, 137-161
members of the Dutch garrison lived in the Timorese settlements far away from the fort. A VOC inspector drew up a highly critical report about the Kupang post in 1705, where he complained of the lack of strict discipline among the men. He quoted as example a certain corporal who lived with his family in Oeba a few miles away, and negligently sent a slave to inform his superiors that he could not go on duty when he was indisposed.\textsuperscript{22}

There were occasional Timorese complaints about bad behaviour on the part of burgers and Company servants, where even regents and kings were roughly treated. In a letter from 1682, the allied regents remarked on an assistant called Blanckelaar who tried to debauch leading aristocrats by means of arrack and then make them put their mark on certain documents. When a grandee refused, Blanckelaar reportedly threatened, “Just wait, I will forestall you in Kupang, and then I will pay back the kings who do against me and who have written [a complaint].”\textsuperscript{23} On another occasion, in c. 1693, a certain Floris Jansz quarrelled with the Raja of Kupang over a horse affair. According to the testimony of a Timorese prince, he drew his cutlass, beheaded the horse with a blow, and shouted “Now eat the horse with skin and hair”, while attacking the raja who had to flee with his wife and child.\textsuperscript{24} What such incidents indicate is the rather modest dimensions of the Timorese kingship, since these European swashbucklers were in a position to treat major aristocrats in an overbearing manner.

There were also relations of a more amicable nature. During the first half-century of Dutch presence, members of the highest Timorese elite married off their daughters to Dutch soldiers and burgers. The aforementioned Floris Jansz was in fact deeply involved with the local aristocracy, since his wife Pieternella was the aunt of a Kupangese raja – the successor of the adversary from the horse affair. The Sonba’i regent Ama Tomnanu (d. 1685) gave his daughter in marriage to the surgeon of the fort, and one of his granddaughters married a Dutch soldier in c. 1695. The latter received special permission to stay in Kupang after his term of duty was over, at the suggestion of Ama Tomnanu’s sons. The ex-soldier later served as a link between the Sonba’i aristocracy and the Company.\textsuperscript{25}

These princely marriages figure less prominently in the sources after the early eighteenth century. From the Timorese point of view, there was no doubt a strategic aspect when the marriages were arranged (for they were most certainly arranged). In the Atoni system a wife-giver is placed in a superior position vis-à-vis the wife-taker. The Dutch husbands, and any authority they represented, were therefore expected to support their Timorese in-laws. To strengthen the bonds with the white foreigners was essential in the early days of the Kupang post – a Dutch withdrawal would have had disastrous consequences for the allied polities. As the Dutch settlement stabilised and the indigenous groups found institutional channels of communication, the role of such marriages may have become less essential. Moreover, the Dutch and Timorese understandings of such marital ties were not always commensurate. A report from 1717 noted that Dutchmen who became free burgers would take the first opportunity to marry the daughter of a raja or grandee. From this, they usually became stout and pretentious. Such persons would cause

\textsuperscript{22} Moussons 12, 2008, 137-161
problems for the Company due to their disputes with the local aristocrats and among themselves (Coolhaas 1979: 267). In view of this, as will be seen below, the official Dutch stance towards intermarriage soon hardened.

As the Kupang post expanded into a small trading port by the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century, there was a degree of economically related contacts between the Timorese aristocracies and the burgers and Chinese. The records are not particularly verbose on this aspect; the principalities were engaged in a system of exchange, an “economy of gifts,” where local products were in effect bartered for weapons and luxury articles, but this exchange was normally conducted with the colonial authorities rather than with individual merchants. Certain regents, especially those of Sonba’i, did however participate in the trading network supervised by the VOC. They owned minor ships which were manned with crews consisting of Timorese and Solorese – the latter were, in contrast with the Timorese, known as good sailors.26

On the other hand, the economic affairs of the Timorese rajas and regents were often in a poor state. In 1743 the opperhoofd complained that Sonba’i had pawned some of their heirlooms to obtain money for textiles and accessories for the “emperor”. The regents were admonished in a vergadering to watch their purses and avoid plunging into insolvable debts. Thirteen years later the Dutch commissioner Johannes Andreas Paravicini undertook a major investigation in the affairs of the Kupang post. In his verbose report he presented a bleak picture of economic oppression of the Timorese principalities, where chiefs were pushed into buying goods from the burgers for extortionate prices (Van der Chijs 1872). During his stay Paravicini made up a verbose contract with all the client princes in the Solor-Timor area, on June 9, 1756. In one paragraph the commissioner found reason to emphasise that the Company allies were not to be molested or intimidated into handing over their goods to Company servants. If so, the wrongdoer was to be seized and turned over to the opperhoofd for rigorous punishment (Corpus VI 1955: 99). And further:

“All the kings and regents have furthermore seen clear evidence how disgraceful, contemptible and pernicious for themselves the conversation and association has hitherto been with the burgers and populace, and what disadvantage this familiarity has caused for their royal and elevated dignity, which must be respected and valued by everyone […] So it is that all the kings and regents with this [contract] accept and promise not to associate or confer anyone, whoever he is, apart from the Opperoofd residing here, and in religious matters the preacher; and also not to enter into marriage relationships other than with their peers, and nor to perpetrate any trade with any of the inhabitants here, either directly or indirectly” (Corpus VI 1955: 102-103).

In other words, the Timorese needed to be protected from the rapaciousness of the Company servants, and to be kept in a relative state of isolation from the latter. Paravicini emphasised that the allied aristocrats must not debase their princely status by becoming the in-laws of such dubious figures. They were to deliver gold, beeswax, slaves, pepper and indigo to the official VOC channels for a reasonable
price, while external goods were only to be purchased from the warehouse in Kupang “against a civil price”. European or coloured persons who entered the settlements without official documents and tried to squeeze the kings and regents in the name of the Company should be taken in custody and brought to Kupang to be treated according to merit (Corpus VI 1955: 104). 27

Finally, an obvious aspect of social interaction was Christianity. Apart from the Dutch, the mardijkers and a small minority of the Chinese belonged to the reformed church. The Timorese groups had been in contact with Catholicism since the early decades of the seventeenth century through the efforts of Portuguese Dominican missionaries, and some of the members of the elite bore Christian names at the time when they made contact with the VOC. The Dutch, nevertheless, displayed a relatively limited interest in conversions of their allies. The christianisation process was allowed to proceed at its own pace. This is in line with the general VOC policy in the Archipelago; pushed conversion attempts were usually avoided since they might create trouble for the relations between the Company and its allies or protégés. During the eighteenth century the practice evolved that the rajas and regents were baptised at or soon after their accession. There is, however, no evidence for mass conversions during the VOC period, not even among the elite.

Still, there is some evidence that Christianity had its own dynamics among some Timorese. A certain Kupangese prince called Paulus even served as a krankenbesoeker (visitor of the sick, a lower clerical position) at the end of the seventeenth century. Some rajas and regents took their religion seriously enough, as revealed by a report by the Calvinist priest Warnerus van Loo, who was sent to Kupang by the clerical authorities of Batavia in 1732. He was to inspect the church and school, and the service of the holy sacraments.

“He has found it necessary, by the decease of the elder Johannes Tano [regent of Kupang] and the deacon Erasmus Hans, to replace them with the elder Leenders van Dijk for the restoration of the church council, which has the following constitution: two elders and two deacons, so that in case of death, there will still be one or two members of the assembly to monitor the church. To that end I have, after the aforementioned nomination, appointed people who are good-natured, humble and lead a pious life, to lead in concert the true Christian reformed religion and to be church deputies; namely Raja Daniel of Amfo’an as elder and Cornelis Zegers as deacon. And regarding that the deacon Amos Pietersz Thenoe 28 has fallen into hard debauchery, with the consequence that his character and life is very un-Christian and bad, which is unsuitably for any deputy, let alone a church servant, I have after ripe deliberation decided that Thenoe is unworthy to serve in this position. Therefore we have appointed Tobias [regent] of Amabi as deacon in his place. This, being the church council of this place according to the maxims of the church of Batavia, which are mostly followed in the eastern churches, has been considered to be presented to the Opperhoofd and the council for their approval.” 29

As we see, the church organization by this time leaned on the authority of individual aristocrats of the Kupang, Amfo’an, and Amabi principalities, who were even given leading positions in the local church community. Clearly, religious space
was a meeting-point where important interaction took place between the European and Timorese worlds – in spite of the official Dutch attempts to keep the two worlds apart. The Timorese Christians probably gained a degree of understanding of the culture and mindset of the white stranger lords, and the other way around.

Savages

The appreciation of the allied Timorese in Company records is strangely ambivalent in the VOC records. While the _opperhoofden_ seldom lauded their native counterparts, their reports nevertheless often suggested the image of harmonious co-habitation. The individual characteristics of the kings and regents were estimated in rather categorical terms, and some of them were praiseworthy in Dutch eyes, namely when they obeyed their commands and readily provided products and _corvée_ labour for the Company.³⁰

This is contrasted by another set of images, namely those depicting the Timorese as savages, in the sense of being opposites of putative Dutch virtues. This is not an unambiguous trait in the texts but is highly situational, and the Dutch discourse varied markedly over time. It must be emphasised that we are dealing not with literary images but solely with texts produced by administrators with regular contacts with the allied leaders. The extant reports only contain such information that was considered useful to the superiors in Batavia and Amsterdam.

The savage image touched relatively lightly the two traits usually associated in the first place with exoticism: race and religion. The physical features of the Timorese, which often evoked comments by nineteenth-century visitors, are rarely alluded to, although there are sometimes negatively laden judgments about the purported “nature” (_aard_) of the natives.³¹ Comments on religion are sparse, and usually concern conversion to Christianity. The few texts that comment animist rituals usually do so without disapproval; the _opperhoofden_ and their council regularly attended non-Christian burials and feasts, and one is reminded of the Dutch participation in the blood oath of 1655. Of course, this does not indicate that Company servants _were_ unprejudiced in these respects; rather, it indicates that these aspects were of little importance for the Dutch activities in the Kupang area (except insofar that it was essential to keep the Timorese allies in a good mood by showing a degree of respect for their customs).

Dutch disapproval is rather reserved to aspects which were detrimental to the Dutch position. The brutality that characterised the skirmishes between the allies and the Portuguese clients found many comments, although Timorese martial practices seem to have been tacitly accepted by the Company servants – more about this below. The mendacity of the Timorese was strongly condemned in various reports – it complicated the Dutch efforts to mediate between the allies when there were problems of any kind. While religion as such was usually considered to be the concern of the Timorese themselves, their “superstitions” were strongly frowned upon when they impeded Company initiatives – for example the Timorese reluctance to dig for metals in the ground.
Much scorn was reserved for the perceived laziness of the indigenous. Dutch complaints about Timorese inertia were occasionally heard in the late seventeenth century, but did not become a mainstay in the reports until well into the eighteenth century. The reasons are not hard to find. In the course of the eighteenth century, the central VOC authorities began to consider ways to make this rather unprofitable outpost pay for the expenses that were involved to keep it going. Since access to sandalwood was limited, various other products were brought forward as possible cash crops: beans, indigo, pepper. Even the cultivation of silk was mentioned for a time, leading to a few frustrated remarks by the Governor-General Dirk Durven (1731). The idea was rather vain,

“…in a land where the [Company] servants themselves at closer explanation held the opinion that such thing would have no effect. First, since the land was full and crawling of ants, and because of the poor and simple dwellings of the indigenous, which are made of wood, covered with straw and protected by bamboo. They have their sleeping places upstairs and place their cattle below. And secondly, since the inhabitants are so lazy by nature that for the entire year they grow nothing but jagung (in The Netherlands known under the name of Turkish flour) for their subsistence. Due to that, one may not think that they were to change their dwellings or build houses for the purpose [of handling silk production]…” (Van Goor 1988: 264-265).32

While the perceived laziness of the Timorese provoked many irritable comments in the reports, it was also felt that the Dutch position on Timor hardly allowed them to force their allies to perform labour by rude means. In a memorandum from 1758 an opperhoofd informed his successor about “the corvée and duties which the five main regents since old have been obliged to perform, however in such way that they must not be forced, but asked and encouraged.”33

Of course, the ethnic stereotypes in the materials provoke questions about the real feelings of trust between the Company and their supposedly roughshod allies. The personal feelings of the Company servants are often rather hard to discern, but one example is found in a Dagregister from 1735. A large troop of invading Topasses and Amakonos threatened the VOC domain, and an ominous rumour spread in Kupang, that some of the allied regents had actually invited the invaders. The Dutch nervously suggested the allies to bring their children inside the fort for security, they being at the same time understood to be hostages. The regents replied that they would gladly do so, and if someone proved ill-loyal, his offspring could readily be sold as slaves by the Company. “So it was”, wrote the opperhoofd Gerardus Visscher, “that in many minds were sorrow and worries, so that I myself began to feel troubled. However, I put my trust in God Almighty, and after putting everything in good order I picked up the parole God is my salvation, and then calmly went to sleep.”34

**CONFLICT WITH THE PORTUGUESE**

The theme of antagonism between the Dutch and Portuguese spheres of influence runs through the history of Timor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Though the two nations were effectively at peace after 1663, this did in no way
stop the mutual machinations. From the official documents issued by each side, the deep distrust, not to say hostility, against the respective counterpart is visible. The tiny Portuguese possessions in Timor and surrounding isles survived in the midst of the trading empire of the VOC, which is the more remarkable since the White Portuguese and the Topasses were frequently at odds with each other in the period 1702-1785. European diplomacy played its role here; the United Provinces and the Batavia administration were not willing to provoke a major brawl with Portugal, which made diplomatic overtures to France and England in the late seventeenth century, and was closely tied to English interests after 1703.

For the local Timorese scene, the ramifications of this antagonism were almost one hundred years of border skirmishes and incursions. On one side stood the five VOC allies, on the other a number of Portuguese client kingdoms, in the first place Amarasi, Amakono and Amanuban. On a few occasions major battles were fought between the fractions. In August 1664 a Sonba’i detachment fought against Amarasi, whose use of firearms finally put the former to flight with a loss of 97 heads. In October 1679 the King of Amarasi with various Portuguese clients and several Topasses invaded the VOC lands and were met by the allies at gunshot distance from Fort Concordia. This time the allies, who were armed with shields and assegais, gained on the enemy when the latter could not maintain a continuous musket fire, and in their turn conquered 103 enemy heads. In December 1712, finally, the Topass leader Domingos da Costa crushed the rebels who had taken refuge close to Kupang, as related above. In none of these clashes did any Dutch or White Portuguese troops participate; it was a matter of war by proxy, or more correctly overlapping colonial and indigenous conflicts.

Most of the fighting was on a much smaller scale. A few Timorese would be trapped here and there as they ventured too far away from the main settlements. An aspect of all this was the practice of headhunting, which appears to have been underpinned by the long-term colonial-related conflict. Enemy heads were prestigious trophies which were used in festive celebrations. Sadly, the heads were not necessarily those of active enemies; those of women and children were taken on several occasions. From the missives written by the opperhoofden, it seems that the Dutch tacitly approved of the headhunting. A notice in the local Dagregister (daily record) from October 28, 1730, is illustrative: “Today, I [the opperhoofd] and the members of the council were invited by the regents of Sonba’i to the feast for the skulls that they took from their enemies a year ago. In the afternoon at 4 o’clock we went to their residence and were very courteously received. At 10 o’clock we bade farewell and returned, each to his house.” On the next day, a Sunday, the Dagregister laconically noted: “The church service was carried out.” At the most, the Company attempted to prevent the worst abuses. In a letter from the Timorese allies to the Governor-General and his council in Batavia, received in October 1682, we read: “Meanwhile, Your Excellencies have decreed that henceforth neither children nor women are to be killed when the fury of war occurs, which is the Dutch manner; that shall also be complied with.”

The Timorese regents expected the Company to take action when obvious transgressions by the Portuguese themselves occurred. In October 1728, the
Sonba’i regent Nai Sau (d. 1739) sent a boat with 16 men to Amfo’an-Sorbian, a principality in the north-west of Timor that was tied to the Portuguese. The idea was to purchase beeswax and to claim some unpaid debts from the locals. The local raja asked the crew of Nai Sau to sail to the estuary of the Balerate River where they would receive goods brought over land. Instead, however, they were suddenly attacked by a boat with fifty armed Topasses. The ship was quickly seized and brought to Tulang Ikan, a Topass stronghold situated to the west of Lifau (in the present-day Oecusse-Ambeno enclave).

In Kupang at the next vergadering, the Timorese regents suggested that the opperhoofd compose a letter of complaint to the Topass leader Francisco Hornay (d. 1730) in Tulang Ikan. The opperhoofd remarked that Nai Sau should have notified him before he sent his ship to an area dominated by the Topasses. Nai Sau insisted, however, and the Company finally sent a brief and rather mild-worded letter to Hornay. The VOC minutes clearly reveal the Dutch attitude: on one hand they did not want to give the allies any reason of discontent, but on the other hand the Company would in no way go any further if Hornay proved unwilling to restore the ship – which turned out to be the case.

At first glance it may seem that the white stranger kings hardly guaranteed the security of the Timorese principalities. Dutch soldiers did not participate in the battles between 1657 and 1749, but rather left the Timorese to fight out their own wars, with their own methods. The Company was not able to stop the constant border skirmishes, and they proved most unwilling to deal with Portuguese outrages. There is, however, more to the picture. The existence of Fort Concordia was in itself a deterrent to the White Portuguese, the Topasses, and their respective clients. In spite of some threatening gestures, the fort and the town were not actually attacked by enemies until the first attempt by the British in 1797. In June and September 1695, detachments of pro-Portuguese Amakonos invaded the Company sphere, but withdrew before any serious fighting had occurred. In March 1735 a Topass-Amakono army ventured close to the fort with the obvious intent to subjugate Sonba’i and carry off the prestigious “emperor” of this principality. They were however ignominiously put to flight by the sound of the Dutch salute for the same emperor, when he sought refuge in the fort at night. In 1744, finally, the Topass leader Gaspar da Costa summoned his manpower in order to “visit” the Company. As it turned out, however, the chiefs refused to go along “as they were of no intent to let themselves be killed for no use.”

Thus it seems likely that the potential power of the VOC underpinned the lasting loyalty that the allied principalities displayed from the start – in spite of the hesitancy and inaction of the local Company servants. With a term documented from the 1680s, the Company was the “Mother and Father” of the allies, who proudly referred to this term before their enemies.

**THE BATTLE OF PENFUI AND ITS AFTERMATH**

The peculiar system with five loyal allies who were stationed around a minor colonial outpost and surrounded by hostile pro-Portuguese principalities, ended
abruptly on a Sunday afternoon in November 1749. On this day a furious battle was fought at Penfui, close to the modern airport east of Kupang. On the attacking side was Gaspar da Costa, the leader or Tenente General of the much-feared Topass soldiers with their firearms and claims to fight for the King of Portugal. They were accompanied by many thousands of Timorese clients. Having invaded the Company territory, Da Costa let his men construct seven or eight stone redoubts, one after another, where they entrenched themselves. Meanwhile the Dutch second lieutenant Christoffel Lip went out from Kupang with about 500 soldiers and volunteers, few of which were whites. The somewhat hesitant Timorese VOC allies followed the movements of Lip – the Dutch told the rajas to have anyone trying to flee the field shot.

The battle ended in a complete and unmitigated disaster for the Topasses. The “Dutch” troop irresistibly conquered redoubt after redoubt, while several Portuguese clients fled the field. Seeing this, the hitherto passive Company allies began to slaughter the enemy. When the last redoubt had been reduced, Gaspar da Costa tried to flee on horseback with a few followers but was struck down by a Timorese assegai and beheaded. A few thousand enemies were killed, as against 22 casualties on the Company side. It was an important victory for the VOC and its allies, which changed the political map of Timor forever (Haga 1882: 397-399).

This dramatic incident was the culmination of a series of defections from the Portuguese side that began in 1748. Several client rajas asked for the protection of the Company, and their bid was cheerfully supported by the five VOC allies. Gaspar da Costa resolved to bring the defectors back with force, though it is not clear if he intended to actually eliminate the Dutch post (Matos 1974: 414-415; Castro 1867: 208). The course of the battle indicates his failure to maintain the loyalty of his manpower – his numerical superiority was of little avail and entities like Amarasi, Amakono and Amanatun fled the field at an early stage.

After the battle a considerable number of principalities chose to submit to the name of the Company. Though some of them later defected from their new suzerain, the event was an important stage in the roughly equal political division of Timor that we have today. A new situation arose where the five original allies constituted a core area, surrounded by rather loosely allied larger principalities. The nominal status of the five allies was thereby enhanced; the Dutch ranked their allies after the date of their submission to the Company, which meant that their rank was higher than more populous inland domains. In a general sense, events proved that the model of Dutch-Timorese co-operation that had evolved since 1653 did not work well on a Timor-wide, or even West Timor-wide scale. Dutch attempts after the mid eighteenth century to force the new allies to perform corvée labour by mining or panning gold were met with deep repugnance and downright hostility (Müller 1857: II, 138-139; Fiedler 1929: 15). So were the military enterprises in the 1750s and 1760s that the Dutch undertook against the remaining Topass possessions – the latter managed to survive in the Oecusse and Noemuti areas not least thanks to the reluctance of the VOC allies to perform military service. Important areas in the interior like Amanuban, Amakono and Belu detached
themselves from the Dutch for long periods, meaning that petty fighting among the Timorese groups did in no way come to a halt. The Dutch colonial reorganization after the Napoleonic Wars had limited consequences for the Timorese scene, except insofar as a few diplomatic treaties established a borderline between the Dutch and Portuguese spheres in the 1850s (Pelissier 1996: 33-40). As late as the 1890s, according to a former controller, “the interior was still almost ‘terra incognita’, the encounters that we had with the inhabitants were only very sporadic and superficial and did not always leave the most pleasant memories. And in the 5% [of the territory] where we had something to say, we did almost nothing. Of roads and bridges, of corvée labour, taxes, cultivation, etc., there was no question; we preserved the order as good or bad as could be, and that was it” (Grijzen 1923: 466).

The five original allies maintained a politically separate existence until the early twentieth century, when a more thorough Dutch (and Portuguese) colonial rule was implemented on the unruly island. The small principalities now definitely lost the function of a protective girdle for the town of Kupang that had maintained them for so long. The consequences were soon to be seen; in 1910 and 1917 they merged into a few larger zelfbesturende landschappen as a part of a Dutch plan to rationalise local governance (Van Dijk 1925, 1934; Bongenaar 2004: 23, 73, 358). Today the descendents of the old rajas and regents lead the life of modest middle-class Kupangers, occasionally making a minor career as local politicians and officials.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The various aspects of interaction between the white stranger kings and their dark allies provide a highly ambivalent picture, which includes both connecting and separating social processes. Kupang in the VOC period was a small colonial settlement whose population apparently ran into hundreds rather than thousands, and where people of European extraction were relatively few. The Dutch were absolutely dependent on a degree of co-operation with local groups (and pliable Chinese merchants) for their survival in a surrounding that was overwhelmingly hostile up to 1749. The five allies, at the same time, desperately needed their white stranger rulers as a warrant for their political – or even physical – survival. In spite of the sometimes doubtful qualities of the VOC staff, which included arrogance, racialist attributions, and unwillingness to risk their skins in conflict situations, their position was never really threatened from the inside. The five original allies remained loyal to the extent that they never launched open rebellions.47

This leads us again to the sociological phenomenon of the stranger king. Of the five allies, four were themselves immigrants to the area – an area that was not in itself particularly fertile. Conflicts flared up between the principalities from time to time. Reading the VOC reports, one gets the impression that these conflicts were frequently on the brink of deteriorating into actual bloodshed. Almost always, however, the Company servants were able to prevent the outbreak of serious violence, or to be more exact, the allies accepted the mediation of “mother and father Company”. Therefore, the role of the white stranger rulers as an ordering,
structuring political entity was a very concrete and essential one; they were able to hold a system in balance, which, for all its deficiencies, worked for close to three centuries without any serious internal rupture. Like in the case of Captain Cook in the well-known studies of Marshall Sahlins, the arrival of the foreign Dutchmen activated an indigenous discourse of ritually anchored power. While the role of the Company lacked the explicitly divine connotations of the Hawaiian example studied by Sahlins, later tradition directly (and un-historically) connected the acknowledging of the Company as “prince and chief” with the cataclysmic defeat of the Portuguese party at Penfui, which was attributed to divine intervention (see Sahlins 1981).

The cultural scope of white stranger kings is found in the former Portuguese parts of the island as well. Elizabeth Traube has pointed out that the Mambai of Timor Leste regard themselves as the “eldest” ethnic group on the island. At the same time the powers of their political leaders are considered to emanate from the Portuguese, who are incorporated in a mythologized system. The Portuguese outsider-rulers are, strictly speaking, not even strangers, since they are but younger returning sons of the land. This cultural embedding of colonialism in a Timorese context is found in ritual speech, which emphasises the common ancestry of the whites and “blacks” (Traube 1986: 52-54). The case of Kupang may appear as less heavily mythologized, but the basic principle as found in later oral traditions is the same: an institutional division between local and superior authority, which is expressed as an opposition between insider and outsider. While such an opposition is found in a great many places in Southeast Asia and Polynesia, the preceding pages should demonstrate how the idea of a stranger king evolved in a historical and relatively well-documented context, and how a mythical theme was thus reinforced by political and social praxis.

Notes
1 VOC 1229, f. 851a-b, in: NA 1.04.02.
2 VOC 1229, f. 851b-852a, in: NA 1.04.02.
3 VOC 1229, f. 858a, in: NA 1.04.02.
4 The Helong kingdom was known as the Kingdom of Kupang until it lapsed in 1917. In fact, however, the urban area of Kupang was detached from the authority of the Helong raja, whose subjects inhabited Pulau Semau and a small territory to the west of the town.
5 VOC 1229, f. 859a, in: NA 1.04.02.
6 Basically the same story is related by the Dutch missionary Geerloof Heymering (1847). Another version is found in Salomon Müller (1857), where the arrival of Sonba’i is correctly placed after arrival of the Dutch to Kupang.
7 Fiedler, *Die Gründung...*, H 475, KITLV Archive.
8 In a similar vein, Muslim rulers who made contracts with the VOC sometimes swore on al-Quran and the Bible.
9 VOC 1243, f. 1583-4, in: NA 1.04.02.
10 VOC 3033, f. 1843b, in: NA 1.04.02.
11 VOC 1894, f. 30-2, in: NA 1.04.02.
12 VOC 1229, f. 865b-866a, in: NA 1.04.02.
13 VOC 1826, f. 4-7, 14-5, in: NA 1.04.02.
14 VOC 1841, f. 1-4, in: NA 1.04.02.
15 As a matter of fact the southern part of the Oesau-Pariti plain, to the east of Kupang, is suitable for sawah cultivation, though it may only have been developed in the early nineteenth century (Ormeling 1956: 51-52).
16 The Sonba’i group that remained under Portuguese suzerainty in the interior of West Timor is known as Greater Sonba’i (Sonba’i Besar), while the smaller group that settled near Kupang is consequently known as Lesser Sonba’i (Sonba’i Kecil). The history of Greater Sonba’i (often also known as Amakono in the sources) is too complicated to be treated in this context. Briefly, it left the Portuguese sphere and submitted to the Dutch in 1749, but later proved rebellious against the VOC. In 1783 the then emperor fled from Kupang to the interior, where he headed a practically independent regime. Greater Sonba’i broke up in the course of the nineteenth century, and the last pretender-emperor was caught by colonial troops in 1906. The territory more or less corresponded to the later landschappen Fatule’u, Mollo, and Miomaffo.
17 VOC 1577, sub January 3 1696, in: NA 1.04.02.
18 VOC 1728, f. 87-93, in: NA 1.04.02.
19 VOC 1711, f. 28, in: NA 1.04.02.
20 VOC 1264, f. 72b, in: NA 1.04.02.
21 The baptismal book of Kupang, 1669-1732, transcript of an original found in Arsip Nasional, Jakarta. I am most grateful to Diderik Kortlang, in Leiden, who provided me with a copy of this invaluable document.
22 VOC 1711, f. 112-3, in: NA 1.04.02. The inspector insisted that the corporal had to recover in the hospital within the palisade. The corporal immediately showed up to carry out his duty – which may say something about conditions in the hospital.
23 VOC 1376, in: NA 1.04.02.
24 VOC 1673, f. 72-3, in: NA 1.04.02.
26 VOC 2073, f. 126; VOC 2133, in: NA 1.04.02.
27 There are interesting issues to be explored about relations between the Timorese and other “non-white” groups in Kupang, such as the Chinese and the mardijkers, and their position inside the system headed by the Company. I hope to come back to this in a later study.
28 Thenoe was a native interpreter who performed some good services for the Company, but who was also known as a notorious wife-beater.
29 VOC 2239, f. 111, in: NA 1.04.02.
30 See f. i. VOC 3473, f. 514b, in: NA 1.04.02, where King Daniel II of Amfo’an (r. 1776-1783) was praised as being virtuous and well inclined to the VOC – since he had delivered limestone to the repair of Fort Concordia, and was also the only Christian regent whose mindset had actually been dissociated from most of the old animistic beliefs.
31 On the other hand, a degree of racial consciousness can be discerned in the Company papers from Kupang, which usually distinguish between white and ethnically mixed Dutchmen.
32 One may compare a Portuguese report from the late eighteenth century: “All these natural advantages are of little interest for the character of the inhabitants of these islands, who are indolent people who cultivate idleness and vices as their major passions; the wives are those who do almost all the domestic and rural work, which does not reserve more for the men than making holes in the ground where the same wives then go and spread the seed” (Matos 1974: 31).
33 VOC 3033, f. 1843b, in: NA 1.04.02.
34 Dagregister, sub March 16 1735, H 244, KITLV Archive.
35 The rivalry between the Topasses and the White Portuguese is an important theme of the history of Timor in the eighteenth century; see especially Matos 1974: 84-99; Castro 1867: 49-95.
36 VOC 1252, f. 250-1; VOC 1359, f. 403-4; VOC 1841, f. 7, 42, in: NA 1.04.02.
37 For materials for the study of Timorese headhunting, see Middelkoop 1963. Some general issues of this martial tradition in Monsoon Asia have been taken up by Barbara Andaya (2004).
38 VOC 2192, f. 160-1, in: NA 1.04.02.
39 VOC 1376, in: NA 1.04.02.
40 VOC 2133, f. 11-6, in: NA 1.04.02.
41 VOC 1577, f. 3-8, in: NA 1.04.02.
42 Dagregister 1735, H 244, KITLV Archive.
43 VOC 2628, f. 27, in: NA 1.04.02; see Heymering 1847: 136.
44 A legendary account, which emphasises the role of the mardijkers in the battle, can be found in Heymering 1847: 143-159.
45 VOC 2741, f. 33-43, in: NA 1.04.02.
46 The Portuguese accounts only state briefly that Da Costa was killed when he pursued rebels of Servião (the Atoni lands of West Timor) who fled to Kupang. Timorese persons later told the Dutch commissioner J. A. Paravicini that Da Costa actually intended to eliminate the “cat eyes”, i.e., the Dutchmen of Kupang, and then turn against the Portuguese governor in Lifau. It is unclear how much substance there is in this assertion.
47 There were only two incidents of openly rebellious conduct, both performed by minor groups within a kingdom. The main raja of Kupang, Ama Besi (r. 1660-78), fled to the Portuguese sphere with some 250 men in November 1678, but the rest of the Kupangese remained loyal to the Company (VOC 1347, f. 520-1, in: NA 1.04.02). In 1743-44 a sub-regent in the Kupang kingdom called Hilak defected and established a stronghold on the rock of Gleba in the interior with a hundred men. He later gave himself up to the Company again (VOC 2628, f. 9-15, in: NA 1.04.02).

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Abstract: The article explores the common Southeast Asian epistemological theme of a “stranger king” as an ordering principle in a polity, a principle that was also relevant in a colonial context. The case studied here is the Dutch colonial post in Kupang, West Timor, in the VOC period, 1653-1800. The Dutch fort was surrounded by five princedoms, which stood in the relation of subordinate allies to the VOC. Four of the five groups had migrated to Kupang due to pressure from the Portuguese and their clients, which dominated the rest of Timor. Arenas of interaction were developed, whereby the elites of the five princedoms deliberated with the Dutch authorities on a regular basis. Their attachment to the Dutch colonial apparatus was actually never broken until the twentieth century, in spite of several reasons for discontent. The article argues that the peculiar situation on Timor, where the five allies were under siege from the clients of the Portuguese, underpinned a system in which the colonial masters were seen as legitimate “princes”, ultimate referents of authority whose very strange-ness enabled them to hold the system in place.

Key-words: Timor, Kupang, stranger king, kingship, early colonial period, VOC (Dutch East Indies Company), Portugal, The Netherlands, legitimacy, oral tradition.

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