

Rethinking the voc

Two Cheers for Progress¹

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In this essay, Jos Gommans provides a short survey of some recent developments in the historiography of the voc. He argues that Asian historians in particular have used the voc archive to acquire new insights into the regional histories of Asia. This progress needs to be consolidated by combining the further exploration of the voc-archive with the in-depth study of the Asian cultures that the voc encountered. Combining archival study and cultural empathy will also shed new light on the historical process of identity formation of both Asians and Dutch.

In dit essay geeft Jos Gommans een kort overzicht van enkele recente ontwikkelingen in de geschiedschrijving van de voc. Hij betoogt dat vooral Aziatische historici het voc-archief hebben gebruikt om nieuwe inzichten te verwerven in de Aziatische regionale geschiedenis. Deze vooruitgang moet worden bestendigd door de verdere exploratie van het voc-archief te combineren met een diepgaande studie van de Aziatische culturen waar de voc mee van doen had. Een dergelijke combinatie van archiefstudie en culturele empathie zal ook meer licht werpen op het historische proces van identiteitsvorming van zowel Aziaten alsook Nederlanders.

We don't know what our ancestors were like or what our descendants will be like. We only know that we are all of us mongrels, dark haired and light haired, who must learn not to bite one another.

Edward Morgan Forster, in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (1951)

It is hard to imagine a topic in the Netherlands that is more contentious than that of the voc, the world's first modern joint-stock company. For many, this was a unique enterprise led by courageous Dutchmen, who, battling against all odds, ventured with great success into uncharted waters – boldly going where no one had gone before. For many others, the voc represents all that is wrong with Dutch colonial history in general: genocide, slavery, oppression and exploitation. The popularity of the latter position is clearly on the rise in Dutch public opinion. Those seeking to thoroughly decolonise Dutch history are becoming increasingly vocal, both in academia and in society at large, as can be witnessed in the current debate around *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete) or the relabelling of public spaces named for celebrated/infamous Company figures such as Jan Pieterszoon Coen (e.g. Amsterdam's Coen Tunnel).² Debates of a similar origin are raging in Dutch museums where curators feel increasingly embarrassed by the 'sudden' revelation that their precious colonial collections comprise trophies of horrendous colonial violence and exploitation.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the increased intensity of the public gaze the history of the voc becomes more relevant than ever before. In order to properly decolonise history, contemporary Dutch society is actually in need of even more research into its colonial past. This is supported by the mounting awareness that Dutch 'Fatherlandic History' (*Vaderlandse Geschiedenis*) has long had an insular character, while actually being intrinsically bound up with the country's intensive interaction with the outside world. Recent years have seen attempts to reflect this in book projects highlighting the global perspective in the making of the Netherlands.³ At the same time, we should not be blind to the fact that a large proportion of the wider public remains sceptical, if

1 Adapted from my welcoming speech at the 'Rethinking the voc' symposium, 23 November 2017, held at National Archives in The Hague. This expanded version of the speech profited enormously from my lively discussions with, and editorial improvements by, Steve Green.

2 At the 'Rethinking the voc' symposium lively discussions took place between activists and archivists about the advisability of decolonising the voc archive, even to the extent of relabelling inventories. For an edited revisit to this poorly conceived discussion, see Thomas Dresscher, 'Het dekoloniseren van archiefbeheer en historisch onderzoek in Nederland', *Archievenblad* 122:9 (2018) 14-19. The muddled definition of

'decolonisation' in an archival context is also addressed in Michael Karabinos's contribution to this forum. A useful discussion (regarding the voc) on the relationship between colonial empires and archives is provided by the 'Early Modern Archives' theme issue of *The Journal of Early Modern History* 22:5 (2018).

3 For example, see the recent attempts to engage with this subject in: Lex Heerma van Voss, Karel Davids, Karwan Fatah-Black e.a. (eds.), *Wereldgeschiedenis van Nederland* (Amsterdam 2018) published by the Huygens Institute for the History of the Netherlands; and the eight-volume Country Series published by the Rijksmuseum (Amsterdam 2014-2018).

not hostile, towards such initiatives, viewing them as cosmopolitan, elitist projects that undermine Dutch traditions and identity.

Dutch window on Asian history

In the context of the ongoing debate at the national level, it is important to realise that the history of the *voc* – including the enormous archive that nourishes it – is of interest not only to the Dutch in the shaping of their identity. It is also as an extremely useful resource for all those societies that, one way or the other, came under the gaze of the *voc*'s panoptic bureaucratic apparatus. The Company generated endless statistics of its own ships and cargoes and those of their European and Asian competitors. It produced reports that speak in detail about the opportunities for the supply and demand of the company's commodities in Asian markets. It is, therefore, entirely unsurprising that Asian historians in particular have studied these reports to learn such a great deal about a subject barely touched upon in indigenous sources: the economic history of 'their own' countries.

But there is much more to the *voc* archive than only its meticulous commercial bookkeeping. During its two hundred years of existence, the Company dispatched numerous diplomatic missions to Asian states, yielding a tremendous number of exhaustive reports about the political organisation of these states and the ritual practices at their courts. In some cases, even the basic chronology of regional dynasties can only be established with the help of *voc* sources, as in the case of the many small South Indian states with whom the *voc* was trading.⁴ As detailed as these Dutch reports may seem, they are obviously also distorted and as such should always be considered only in combination with additional sources in other European and, when available, Asian languages. It is through the combined use of European (including Dutch) and Asian primary sources, that scholars have gained astonishing new insights into various political, social-economic and cultural developments in early modern Asia.⁵ One final example of what the *voc* archive has in store, relates to the Company's legal system. In places such as Java, Sri Lanka and Kerala, the archive generated a great number of court cases in which – by reading them

4 Lennart Bes, *The Heirs of Vijayanagara: Court Politics in Early Modern South India* (unpublished PhD thesis, Radboud University Nijmegen 2018).

5 To name just two very successful examples: Anthony Reid, *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680*, 2 vols (New Haven/London 1988-1993) and Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period*

Tamilnadu (Delhi 1992). See also Subrahmanyam's recent comments in which he also makes short shrift of Dutch and other North European historians for their lack of cultural imagination 'Hybrid Affairs: Cultural Histories of the East India Companies', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 55:3 (2018) 419-438 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0019464618778408>.

against the grain – the voices of the local ‘subaltern’, albeit distorted through the interpretation of the Dutch interface, can be heard, often surprisingly loud and clear.⁶ As we can read in Remco Raben’s fascinating contribution to this forum discussion, viewing history through the lens of the Company’s judicial system creates a distorted image of a deeply segregated society based on rigid ethnic identities. Hence, inspired by the work of Bernard Cohn and many others that worked on the British Raj, Raben argues in favour of a more ‘eccentric’ reading of the colonial sources that sees beyond ‘the barriers of Dutch colonial labelling’. Here I can only but agree, although we should not assume that it was only the Europeans who imposed such categories. Identity formation is neither an exclusively colonial nor a modern process; precolonial Asia was far from being that idyllic place – often created by anti-modern intellectuals – where ethnic and religious identities were pleasantly fluid and negotiable.⁷

Asian scholars started to make use of the VOC archive as early as the 1970s and 1980s, but at this time there was no guarantee whatsoever that their pioneering work would be continued by a younger generation.⁸ Despite the increasing awareness that the VOC archive contained enormous riches for the early modern history of Asia, there was also the ongoing threat that much of it would remain hidden from Asian historians, simply because they lacked the necessary knowledge to interpret the exotic language and script in which it was written. For this reason, almost two decades ago, Leiden University and the Dutch National Archives in The Hague took up the initiative of the now emeritus professor Leonard Blussé to start a common effort to train Asian and also South African students in the use of the Dutch colonial archive.⁹

6 As in the case of Nadeera Rupesinghe’s ‘Do You Know the Ninth Commandment: Tensions of the Oath in Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka’, *Comparative Legal History* 7:1 (2019). Rupesinghe currently works on a monograph based on her 2016 Leiden dissertation: *Navigating Pluralities: Colonial Lawmaking in Eighteenth-century Sri Lanka*.

7 For an incisive discussion of this issue, see Gijs Kruijtzer, *Xenophobia in Seventeenth-Century India* (Leiden 2009), a study that is based extensively on VOC and South Asian sources. See also Sumit Guha, ‘The Politics of Identity and Enumeration in India, c. 1600-1990’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45:2 (2003) 148-167. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417503000070>.

8 Take for example the work of the ‘great three’ from South Asia: Ashin Das Gupta, Sinnapah Arasaratnam and Om Prakash – work that has been continued by Prakash’s formidable student

Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who started as an economic historian and went on to become one of the founding fathers of connective global history.

9 This programme was called TANAP (2000-2007) but was later continued under the labels ENCOMPASS (2006-2012) and Cosmopolis (2012-2017). This programme has now been extended once more (albeit at a smaller scale) at both MA and PhD level, as Cosmopolis Advanced (2018-2023). More than 150 young students from various Asian countries (and from South Africa) have undergone training through this programme. For an impression of the output see the TANAP book series published by Brill. After TANAP, most of the scholars used other channels to publish their work, but the new series ‘Colonial and Global History through Dutch Sources’ published by Leiden University Press is now continuing the TANAP series.

Now, twenty years later, it is clear that a new generation of Asian scholars has emerged to continue the work of the early pioneers. Like their predecessors, they are not only perfectly able to read Dutch, they also have an unequivocally Asian perspective on the Dutch archive and, by extension, on history in general – whether of the Netherlands and Europe or their own country and region. In this regard it is telling that the new Cosmopolis Advanced programme will be almost fifty percent funded by Indonesian institutions, a fact that sits well with its emphatic aims to develop Asian research centres to train regional and extra-regional students and offer them the opportunity to combine the acquisition of Dutch and local Asian languages, learning from scholars with proven experience in both.¹⁰ This effect has been dramatically amplified now that almost the entire VOC archive has been digitised, removing any imperative on the part of Asia-based scholars to physically visit the Netherlands to consult its resources. Although increasing accessibility makes digitisation an undoubted and colossal blessing, it also means we must create alternative spaces – virtual coffee bars – where researchers can informally exchange ideas and issues with one another.

Retrospect

Looking back at two decades of VOC-related research in the Leiden programme, we should ask ourselves to what extent the study of the VOC archives has led to some rethinking, not so much of the VOC, but of early modern Asian history in both its regional and global dimensions. What has been achieved so far, and what challenges await us in the near future? These questions naturally also impact on how we perceive the VOC itself.

So let us return for a moment to the famous Dutch scholar Jacob van Leur who eighty years ago was ahead of his time when he urged historians of the VOC to abandon the perspective of the company's ships, forts and factories – or in Dutch: 'het gezichtspunt van de benauwde kleine Europeesche forterres, de bedompte loge en het gewapende schip op de ree' – in order to write a more Indo-centric history. Particularly during the last two decades, Van Leur's appeal has been taken up in dead earnest, thanks to the contributions of a new generation of in particular Asian scholars. This new, more Asia-centric perspective has allowed scholars to achieve valuable new insights into early modern Asian history. These range from an improved understanding of regional trading circuits – from the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea – to breakthroughs on various cultural and social developments in Asian societies.

¹⁰ The other fifty percent is being funded by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and the University of Leiden.

To name just a few examples of this more Asia-centric perspective, we have seen regional studies on the Thai court, the peasantry of Sri Lanka, the Islamisation of eastern Java and the Christianisation of the Mindanao region. At the same time, there has been growing attention for transcultural phenomena: the global ingredients of VOC operations, such as forced migration, the multi-ethnic background of VOC crews and personnel and, of course, the VOC's involvement in slavery and the slave trade.¹¹ Indeed, in her thought-provoking contribution to this forum Manjusha Kuruppath finds the global dimension of the Company to be the most promising avenue of research, writing that 'several connected histories of the Indian Ocean world are waiting to be written'. We should not forget, however, that the conventional, commodity-based histories of the VOC were global *avant la lettre*. Although one may agree with Kuruppath that it is the cultural dimension of this global trading company that is most neglected, one should not forget that even in the sphere of trade, there is still much to explore, in particular regarding the Company's intra-Asian trade.¹² A study of the VOC's intra-Asian network will surely also reveal a great deal of information on the often equally global trading networks of the Company's European and Asian competitors.¹³

When using the VOC archive as an investigative window into primarily Asian history, we must be vigilant to the fact that the VOC was a data-processing organisation and always bear this in mind in our studies. Many historians have taken up James Tracy's inspiring argument that the notion of Oriental Despotism is partly a fiction derived from the writings of regional VOC directors who would regularly communicate to their superiors in Batavia that despite their perhaps disappointing trade figures they were actually doing very well considering the 'despotic' circumstances in which they had to operate.¹⁴ We are now taking Tracy's argument a step further and entering a phase in which Asian, Dutch and other historians join forces to study the VOC not so much as a unique trading company but as a producer of a very

11 See also Guido van Meersbergen's insightful comments in his 'Writing East India Company History after the Cultural Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Seventeenth-Century East India Company and the Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie', *Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies* 17:3 (2017) 10-36. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2017.0016>.

12 For example, see the huge potential offered by the Bookkeeper General Batavia database at Huygens KNAW, <http://bgb.huygens.knaw.nl/>.

13 For an overview, see my 'Continuity and Change in the Indian Ocean Basin, 1400-1800', in: Jerry H. Bentley, Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks and Sanjay

Subrahmanyam (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the World, Vol. 6, Part 1: The Construction of a Global World, 1400-1800 CE* (Cambridge 2015) 182-210.

14 James D. Tracy, 'Asian Despotism? Mughal Government as Seen from the Dutch East India Company Factory in Surat', *Journal of Early Modern History* 3:3 (1999) 256-280. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006599X00260>. For my own attempt in this direction, see my 'South Asian Cosmopolitanism and the Dutch Microcosmos in Seventeenth-Century Cochin (Kerala)', in: Catia Antunes and Jos Gommans (eds.), *Exploring the Dutch Empire: Agents, Networks and Institutions, 1600-2000* (London 2015) 3-26.

powerful colonial discourse. This discourse was not only generated ‘at home’ in the Dutch Republic but also through the Company’s innumerable global interactions and regional engagements.¹⁵ Hence, Asian scholars consulting the VOC archive with their own regional objectives in mind simply cannot conduct their research without a serious engagement with the regional culture of the people who produced these sources. In the end, the Asian scholars’ understanding of Dutch culture will surely have deep repercussions for the way that culture is perceived, not in the least by the Dutch historians who on the whole have been overly preoccupied with the rather parochial ‘fatherlandic’ perspective in which the notion of empire was either barely present or entirely absent. In short, more than a decade after the then Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Peter Balkenende, praised the ‘VOC-mentality’ in patriotic terms, we are now beginning to gradually deconstruct that mentality by applying the ‘history of mentalities’ to the VOC.

To sum up, looking back at two decades of ‘VOC studies’ we can observe in our research agendas an Asian, a global and a cultural turn.¹⁶ Interestingly, Van Leur’s appeal even seems to have stimulated some Asian scholars to leave their own shores to look at the Netherlands first-hand, and by doing so they are just starting to change or – to use Dipesh Chakrabarty’s phrase – ‘provincialise’ Dutch identity itself; whether the Dutch like it or not.¹⁷

Prospect

This last aspect brings me to the challenges of the future. Now that the VOC archive has been digitised and is viewable on people’s desktop worldwide,

15 See Manjusha Kuruppath, *Staging Asia: The Dutch East India Company and the Amsterdam Theatre, c. 1650 to 1780* (Leiden 2016) and the forthcoming dissertation of Byapti Sur on the Dutch discourse on corruption (*Keeping Corruption at Bay: A Study of the VOC’s Administrative Encounters in Seventeenth-Century Mughal Bengal*). Although still fragmentary, Miles Ogborn’s study on the EIC, *Indian Ink: Script and Print in the Making of the East India Company* (Chicago / London 2007), provides an excellent model for what can be achieved if one were to analyse the VOC specifically as a data-producing organisation.

16 Here I should stress that although students from South and East Asia have successfully mined the VOC archive, Indonesian students have, with a few exceptions, focused on the later colonial archives.

The Cosmopolis Advanced programme therefore aims to stimulate research focusing on the ‘VOC period’ in what is now Indonesia, preferably in combination with coeval Malay and Javanese sources – it is worth noting in this context that reading pre-modern Javanese is perhaps under a far greater threat as a research skill than reading Dutch.

17 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton 2000). Although not from an Asian background, Gloria Wekker’s *Saidian White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham 2016) is an interesting case in point, although even her decolonising project lacks the global perspective that would have enabled her to provincialise not only Europe, but also its racism.

we should perhaps become more sensitive to the heated public debates currently raging in society. But in doing so, I feel that we as historians should refrain from imposing simplistic moral judgements on an era that was so different from ours. We should steer a course guided not by shame or pride, but by curiosity and empathy. Such empathy implies an ability to re-enact the past in different cultural contexts at the level of the human individual.¹⁸ In the case of the VOC archive, it follows that we should attempt to reconstruct the human agency of the people behind the institutional facade of the Company. Too often, we are presented with a generic VOC, while the main actors in the events concerned with were in fact individual Company servants operating behind the scenes, following agendas entirely their own. Hence, what we need is more biographical and prosopographical research at all levels of the Company's organisation. It will enable us to detect personal networks of kith and kin, both inside the Company and, more importantly, outside it. Thanks to the excellent detective work carried out by the trailblazers Holden Furber and Femme Gaastra, we know already quite well how Dutch and English individuals in Bengal created secret partnerships with each other to facilitate their illicit private enterprises. We need to know more, though, about those networks that breached the various local spheres in Asia such as through the innumerable sexual relationships between Company servants and indigenous women. More generally speaking, the VOC could not have survived in Asia without the help of indigenous cultural brokers. But also among the Dutch, we find translators, medical doctors, painters, mercenaries and others taking up similar intermediate roles at Asia's royal courts. And what about those forgotten networks that connected the VOC with the Atlantic and prompted one recent historian to suggest the existence of not two distinct Dutch companies – the VOC and the WIC – but a single Dutch *empire*?¹⁹ These personal, cross-cultural, intra- and extra-imperial partnerships still await detailed study.

What we need most in all these endeavours is empathy; empathy with many disparate cultures separated by both space *and* time! History is not primarily about whether we, living in the here and now, should talk about 'slaves' or 'enslaved people', should rename our street names or not.²⁰ No, it is about our power to understand the past and our intention to do so from all possible perspectives. The past was indeed especially painful for those who were killed, enslaved or exploited and the past is often a painful subject

18 Use of the term 're-enact' drawn from Robin George Collingwood's *Idea of History* (1946).

19 Erik Odegard, *Colonial Careers: Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen, Rijckloff Volkertsz. van Goens and Career Making in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Empire* (unpublished PhD thesis, Leiden University 2018).

20 Elsewhere similar debates are raging that could have far more dangerous repercussions, since they affect the vulnerable position of minorities. In India, for example, communal unrest led to governments deciding to rename streets named after the Muslim ruler Aurangzeb.



▲
Shah Jahan and his son, drawing by Rembrandt van Rijn after a Mughal Miniature (c. 1656-1658). For a discussion of the way Indian painting and philosophy inspired quintessential Dutch artist like Rembrandt and Mondrian, see Jos Gommans, *The Unseen World: The Netherlands and India from 1550* (Amsterdam/Nijmegen 2018).

for those who carry the burden of its legacy. But I believe that historians of all backgrounds, ‘dark haired and light haired’, should now try to tell the whole story, of both the colonisers and the colonised. If we lose the power to understand the past as being precisely that, history will be reduced to a series of caricatures to die in the flattened, easy-to-digest summaries of our present-day historical ‘canons’ and museums. We should bear in mind that, in the famous words of L. P. Hartley, ‘The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.’

That said, all this should be done in the full awareness that all cultures are made in interaction with their outside worlds. For example, how Indian would Mahatma Gandhi have been had he not read about *the* Indian village or even about Indian religion in English? Or bringing it back home to a Dutch case: can we understand those quintessentially Dutch painters Rembrandt or Mondrian without considering their deep engagement with, respectively, South Asian miniatures and South Asian philosophy? In other words, what does all this mean for the idea of Dutch identity, and more in particular, for the Dutch debate about ‘our’ colonial past?

Dutch identity

Awareness of these dynamics forces us, Dutch archivists, historians and curators, to engage deeply with the cultures that we can and should study through the wonderful window that is the VOC archive, but – mind you – never to the exclusion of all other windows, whether European or Asian! An in-depth engagement with ‘other’ cultures therefore remains absolutely crucial – also for the Dutch public at large – not only if we are to understand those ‘others’, but even if we want to understand ourselves.²¹ We should persist in exploring ‘elsewhere’ as this will serve as a negative mirror of the self, or as expressed by the early globetrotter Marco Polo: ‘The traveller recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have.’²²

Meanwhile, let us not concern ourselves too much with current issues of ‘cultural appropriation’, since how can we empathise with the other without appropriating the other in one way or another? An overemphasis of

21 It is for this reason that Piet Emmer and I wrote a survey of the Dutch colonial empire in Asia ‘from the inside out’: from each regional political centre towards the coast. See our *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld. De geschiedenis van Nederland overzee 1600-1800* (Amsterdam 2012). It is currently being revised and translated for publication in 2020 as *The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600-1800* (Cambridge).

22 Attributed to Marco Polo by the Italian novelist Italo Calvino in his *La città invisibili*. Citation taken from *Invisible Cities* (Vintage Classics, 1997), translated by William Weaver (in Italian: ‘L’altrove è uno specchio in negative. Il viaggiatore riconosce il poco che è suo, scoprendo il molto che non ha avuto e non avrà.’).

ethnic or social identities can only create fixed dichotomies that in the end will undermine the historian's capacity to understand the connections that produced and still produce these very identities.²³ Even worse, it could lead to certain groups claiming their own convenient 'post truth' on the basis of 'alternative facts'; a hazardous phenomenon that is as relevant for our own times, as it has been for the entire preceding modern era. More than twenty-five years ago Salman Rushdie warned us that 'the largest and most dangerous pitfall would be the adoption of a ghetto mentality' that allows us to forget that 'there is a world beyond the community to which we belong'. It would lead us 'to go voluntarily into that form of internal exile which in South Africa is called the "homeland"'.²⁴

More generally speaking, in their efforts to empathise with others, historians should not and cannot avoid comparing and connecting their histories with those of others. Stressing differences between cultures is one obvious outcome of this, but what is perhaps more important at a time of unprecedented levels of cultural encounter is the exploration of their commensurabilities, which will reveal that cultures have never been fixed, that they have always been manufactured in interaction with each other.²⁵ The challenge of the future will be to forget our present-day identities for a moment in order to grasp the way in which these often forgotten connections have made the identities of the past. To cite Rushdie one final time: 'The past is a country from which we have all emigrated ... its loss is part of our common humanity.'²⁶ I am sure that the VOC archive will prove to be of enormous help in the endeavour to re-enact and reconnect the past that was lost. So don't just sit there or read this: go to gahetna.nl and explore the countless facts and figures, stories and discourses in the VOC archive on your own. Pick up the lost pieces and let's make progress!

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23 For just such a process in South Asian studies, see Richard M. Eaton's enlightening analysis in '(Re)imag(in)ing Otherness: A Postmortem for the Postmodern in India', *Journal of World History* 11:1 (2000).

24 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London 1992) 19.

25 One modest attempt is my recent *The Unseen World: The Netherlands and India from 1550* (Amsterdam/ Nijmegen 2018).

26 Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 12.