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In the Company of Global History

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Global history has in the last decades developed as a popular approach in history writing. The history of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) is inevitably a global one. But how perceptive are histories of the VOC to trends in global history? Does conceptualizing VOC history as a global history bring any value to the exercise? This essay argues that global history will encourage historians of the VOC to ask new questions and pursue new lines of research. It will prod historians to put VOC archives to innovative use and integrate the Company into writing more inclusive comparative and connected histories of the Indian Ocean and early modern world.

In de geschiedwetenschap heeft een globale benadering de laatste decennia aan belangstelling gewonnen. De geschiedenis van de Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) is onmiskenbaar een globale geschiedenis. Maar hoeveel aandacht is er in de huidige geschiedschrijving van de VOC voor deze trend inzake wereldgeschiedenis? Wat is de waarde van de conceptualisering van de geschiedenis van de VOC als een wereldgeschiedenis? In dit essay wordt beargumenteerd dat een mondiale benadering historici van de VOC aanmoedigt nieuwe vragen en onderzoeksthema's op te werpen. Een globaal perspectief zal historici stimuleren de archieven van de VOC op een vernieuwende manier te gebruiken en de geschiedenis van de Compagnie te integreren in een meer inclusieve, vergelijkende en verweven geschiedenis van de Indische Oceaan en van de vroegmoderne wereld.

Introduction

In the last two and a half decades, global history has become an immensely popular approach in history writing. This period has also experienced a significant amount of self-reflection about the identity of global history, its purpose, methodology and benefits. According to Patrick O'Brien, global

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history seeks to 'represent the past in ways that might promote cross-cultural conversations recognized as useful for the future of mankind'.[2] In other words, the purpose of global history, in the spirit of the globalised world we live in, is to remove fences and promote inclusiveness. It seeks to tear down the boundaries set up by the national and regional histories and point to the vibrant connections and startling similarities in the human condition in different parts of the world. Global history is thus, in many ways, post-national history and therefore very similar if not the same as world or transnational history. The second aim of global history is to distance itself away from Eurocentrism. Histories of the world emerging from the western historical tradition have commonly told the story of Europe's exceptional progress which since the mid-twentieth century has drawn inspiration from the modernisation theory. This conception of history is based on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theorisations of Karl Marx and Max Weber who sought to understand Europe's present in their times. Marx identified stages of production that Europe would undergo before the overthrow of capitalism and Weber studied the development of institutions and practices such as constitutional government, secularism and capitalism which he regarded as representative of and responsible for Europe's modernity.[3]

The impact of modernization theory in evaluating our period in history has meant an emphasis on the history of European expansion and on finding the seeds of modernity in the thought processes and practices of Europe in the wider world. A critique of such histories articulated by schools of history such as postcolonialism and subaltern studies has fed into the general objectives of global history which aims to tell the story of how the world came together instead of the tale of the advancement of one part of the world at the expense of another. One such work which pursues these wider aims is Charles Parker's *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400-1800*.[4] It takes attention away from European expansion in the early modern period by working with a chronology which does not give the 1490s special treatment

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the symposium titled 'Rethinking the Dutch East India Company' at the National Archives in The Hague (23-24 November 2017). I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to participate in this conference. Many of the ideas outlined in this paper have drawn on my experience of teaching the immensely ambitious and innovative paper titled 'Eurasian Empires' at the University of Oxford. This paper was designed by Dr. Alan Strathern. I would like to thank Alicia Schrikker and Archishman Chowdhury for their comments on earlier drafts of this write-up. I would also like to thank the editorial office of BMGN-LCHR for editing the piece.

2 Patrick O'Brien, 'Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives for the Restoration of Global History', *Journal of Global History* 1:1 (2006) 39 https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740022806000027.

3 Jack Goldstone, 'The Problem of the "Early Modern" World', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 41:3 (1998) 249-284.

4 Charles Parker, *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400-1800* (Cambridge 2010).

and reminds us that the assumption of European hegemony in this period is an anachronism. Parker, in addition, emphasises the idea that the Qing, Romanovs, Mughals, Safavids and Ottomans also counted among the empire builders of the early modern period. This is often forgotten in our anticipation of the later creation of colonial empires in Asia.

Methodologically, global historians have principally relied on writing connected and comparative histories. Connected histories plot 'historical phenomena in which there is contact linking two or more societies'.[5] Conceptualised by Joseph Fletcher and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, connected history comes alive in Subrahmanyam's seminal article, entitled 'Connected Histories: Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', in which he looks at how a tradition of apocalyptic thought in Christianity and Islam was manifested in distinctive settings across Eurasia in the sixteenth century.[6] Comparative history, which is the second method, teases out the similarities and differences in the responses of polities or communities to historical experiences. Victor Lieberman's monumental work *Strange Parallels*, an oft-quoted example of comparative history, is symptomatic of recent comparative global histories which seek not so much to emphasise the differences and divergences between the units of enquiry, but to stress the commonalities involved.[7] While Lieberman's work is clearly a large-scale history asking big questions about a sizeable part of a globe over a dauntingly wide time frame of a millennium, not all global historians believe that global histories should be blanket, all-encompassing histories.

On the contrary, global history comes in various kinds of packaging and historians argue that successful global histories can and should be able to actively converse with micro, local and regional histories. One such work which reveals the immense potential and versatility of global history is John Paul Ghobrial's *The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon* which traces the life of a seventeenth-century traveler.[8] As a global micro-history, this work effectively marries the genres of micro-history and biography to plot the global life of an Eastern Christian turned Catholic named Elias whose travels took him from his homeland in Mosul in present-day Iraq to Europe and South America. Ghobrial's protagonist is a non-European which is a strong counterpoint

5 Joseph Fletcher, 'Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period, 1500-1800', in: Joseph Fletcher (ed.), *Studies on Chinese and Islamic Inner Asia* (Aldershot 1995) 2.

6 Ibidem, 1-46; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories: Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies* 31:3, Special Issue 'The Eurasian Context of the Early Modern History of Mainland South East Asia, 1400-1800' (1997) 735-762.

7 Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*. Vol. 1: *Integration of the Mainland* (Cambridge 2003); Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*. Vol. 2: *Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands* (Cambridge 2009).

8 John-Paul A. Ghobrial, 'The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon and the Uses of Global Microhistory', *Past & Present* 222:1 (2014) 51-93.

to the idea that itinerancy of global proportions was a peculiarly European accomplishment, even though he was travelling through maritime routes opened up by Europeans. Ghobrial, in addition, shows how global histories are not incompatible with local histories, but that most histories are often complex entanglements of the two.

How do histories of the VOC sit in discussions of global history? The history of the Dutch East India Company is inevitably a global one and there can hardly be any debate about the extent of the Company's operations or its place in the history of the early modern Indian Ocean. The VOC spread its tentacles from South Africa to Deshima in Japan, with settlements of varying sizes and influence across the breadth of maritime Asia. This diverse and enduring two century presence in the region has meant that there is little wonder that the history of the VOC, like the Dutch Republic, has for many decades been associated with the idea of modernity, and notions of Company dynamism have for long been woven into the 'rise of the West' narrative. Niels Steensgaard, for instance, regarded the VOC's financial model as characteristically modern.[9] In a similar vein, Jonathan Israel wrote in the preface to his landmark work *Dutch Primacy in World Trade*, '(...) no one has ever disputed, or is ever likely to, the centrality of Dutch maritime and commercial activity for over a century in the making of the early modern world'.[10] Both works reveal and reinforce a 'classic' image of the Company that has strongly influenced academic perspectives of the enterprise. These views have also bled into popular imagination and, even for an informed outsider, the Company is often seen as representative of modernity.

Some histories of the VOC therefore demonstrate the same Eurocentrism that recent historians, including global historians, seek to combat. Yet, how congenial is VOC history to the writing of global histories? If we consider the movement of humans, commodities and ideas to constitute the backbone of global connective histories, it is hard to miss the extent of migration that the Company facilitated, either in terms of voluntary or forced movement, of people between Europe and Asia and between its settlements in the Indian Ocean. The Company's intra-Asian and intercontinental trade in a staggering range of commodities is equally noteworthy, as is the role of the enterprise in the circulation of ideas, such as the spread of Christianity, art, science and technology. Connectedness and diversity, it seems therefore, are ingrained in the very nature of the Company. The potential for writing comparative and connected histories can also be realised quite easily because the wide range of Company settlements in various parts of the Indian Ocean world functioned not merely as chroniclers of Company history but also as

9 See discussion of Steensgaard in Marcus Vink, 'Between Profit and Power: The Dutch East India Company and Institutional Early Modernities in the Age of Mercantilism', in: Charles Parker and Jerry Bentley (eds.), *Individual and Community in the Early Modern World* (Lanham 2007) 285-302.

10 Jonathan Israel, *Dutch Primacy In World Trade, 1585-1740* (Oxford 1989) preface.

observatories from which they witnessed and reflected on the polities and people they interacted with. This makes the VOC archives a veritable goldmine of information about the Indian Ocean world and as the website of UNESCO puts it: 'the VOC archives make up the most complete and extensive source on early modern world history anywhere'.[11] The vast size of the archive sets to rest the chief criticism addressed to global history, namely that it has to contend with the paucity of primary sources that mars its writing.

We might then agree that the history of the VOC and the available archives of the Company chronicle phenomena that global historians seek to engage with, but how do VOC histories fit in with the objectives of global history? As we saw before, global history aims to contest the twin tyrannies of Eurocentrism and the nation-state. Just as global history exhibits a clear genealogy of influences from various schools of history writing in the objectives it has devised, histories of the VOC too have sought to address these issues in the last decades. There has been a persistent emphasis on the need to move away from Eurocentrism particularly, in terms of reconceptualising the role of the Company in the Indian Ocean World. The VOC has traditionally been envisioned as intruders and victors who extirpated all trade and enterprise in the region. Characterisations of the Company have since then evolved. Marcus Vink in *Between Profit and Power* presents a historiographical trajectory of the changing views of the nature and impact of the Company presence in Asia.[12] He notes that among the first to reconceptualise the role of the Company were Jacob van Leur and Marie Meilink-Roelofsz. While Van Leur was convinced that the Indian Ocean trading world was no tabula rasa that the VOC reigned supreme over, the view that the VOC contended with (albeit successfully) and resisted the trading activities of Asian merchant communities was strengthened by Meilink -Roeloefz. In an attempt to further expand our knowledge about local traders, Sinnappah Arasaratnam pointed to the presence of 'political merchants' in South Asia in the seventeenth century, which is an idea further developed by Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Christopher Bayly in their now familiar concept of the 'portfolio capitalist.'[13] According to these authors, there were people like Mir Ardestani (also known as Mir Jumla) of the Sultanate of Golconda, who held positions of considerable political clout in the subcontinent and also dabbled in 'seaborne trade, internal trade, the farming of revenue, control over mines, and military functions.'[14] This observation suggests that European companies were not

11 Memory of the World Register: Nomination form. Accessed on 04.04.2019. http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/multimedia/hq/ci/ci/pdf/mow/nomination_forms/netherlands+voc+archives.pdf.

12 Vink, 'Between Profit and Power'.

13 For an explanation of both concepts: Arasaratnam's 'political merchant' and Subrahmanyam's and Bayly's 'portfolio capitalist', see Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Christopher Bayly, 'Portfolio Capitalists and the Political Economy of Early Modern India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 25:4 (1988) 401-424.

14 Ibidem, 413.

alone in displaying a collusion of political and economic interests and that it was a more widespread phenomenon.

Together with the myriad groups of actors of the Indian Ocean World who competed with the VOC, the character of the Company trade has also undergone revision. Contrary to the traditional image of the Company as a hegemonic enterprise suggestive of its power and ceaseless innovation, Jan de Vries suggests that European trade in Asia experienced its share of complexities, hardships and reversals. He argues that 'trade grew slowly, monopoly power was elusive, and sustained profits were hard to come by.'[15]

Just as economic histories have cut the VOC down to size and have gradually revised the perspective that the Dutch enjoyed unbridled successes in their trading operations, appraisals of the political power of the VOC have also been revised. A line of historians, starting with Madhava Panikker, had sought to evaluate the Company's strength in Asia.[16] The most recent works like Tonio Andrade's *Beyond Guns, Germs and Steel* encourages us to rethink the notion of European exceptionalism by pointing to the reversals that European powers, including the Dutch, experienced in Asia, such as the rout of the Company from Taiwan by Chengchengong in 1662.[17] These tales of European reversals, Andrade argues, do not often get told in the histories of 'European expansion'.

All of these histories veer away from Eurocentrism by reconceptualising the political and economic role of the VOC in Asia. When discussing the changing perspectives about the VOC, it is also important to reflect briefly on the kind of histories being produced – who and which spaces are being written about. Most histories which rely on the archives of the VOC for source material are 'company centric' histories. There has been a steady stream of such histories and, needless to say, they identify the Dutch Republic or the VOC as the principal subjects of enquiry. Charles Boxer's *The Dutch Seaborne Empire*, Femme Gaastra's *The Dutch East India Company* and Els Jacob's *Merchants in Asia*, which are regarded as standard textbooks of Company history, would be examples of such histories.[18] A second set of histories either study the Dutch encounters with or the Dutch impact on nationally defined entities or seek to excavate the history of a space, again conceived in national terms, such as Leonard Blussé's *Tribuut aan China*, Cees Brouwer's *Cauwa and*

15 Jan de Vries, 'The Limits of Globalization in the Early Modern World', *The Economic History Review* 63:3 (2010) 730.

16 See Marcus Vink (ed.), *Mission to Madurai: Dutch Embassies to the Nayaka Court of Madurai in the Seventeenth Century, vol. 4: Dutch Sources on South Asia c. 1600-1825* (Delhi 2012) 44.

17 Tonio Andrade, 'Beyond Guns, Germs and Steel: European Expansion and Maritime Asia, 1400-1750', *Journal of Early Modern History* 14:1 (2010) 165-186.

18 Charles Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600-1800* (London 1965); Femme Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company: Expansion and Decline* (Zutphen 2003); Els Jacobs, *Merchant in Asia: The Trade of the Dutch East India Company during the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden 2006).

Comptanten: De Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie in Jemen or recent works like Aad van Amstel's *De voc in de slag met China* or Hoang Anh Tuan's *Silk for Silver: Dutch-Vietnamese relations*.[19] Where such histories of impact, encounter and interaction escape the clutches of the nation-state, they become more localised and devote themselves to studying these processes within regional spaces such as Java, Malabar or Ayutthaya. The foci of such histories can be problematic for several reasons. Histories of the VOC written in relation to nation-states impute anachronistic spatial categories into the early modern past. Institutional histories, on the other hand, might be cognisant of the VOC's geographical domain of activity and adopt this space as their field of study. However, without engaging in a comparative exercise, they are vulnerable to uncritically accepting the VOC, to use Jos Gommans' phrase, to be 'a unique enterprise of courageous Dutchmen'. As James Belich usefully reminds us, 'comparative history may be the best way to test, and if necessary undermine, grand narratives.'[20] This should encourage us to think about how comparative and connected global history can transform ways in which we write Company histories.

Comparative histories

It would be an error to think of comparative history, in the context of Company histories, as an innovation that global historians are to be credited for. One only need to remember the numerous Company histories which are in fact comparative ones, such as Bob Moore and Henk van Nierop's *Colonial Empires Compared*, Karel Davids' *Dutch and Spanish Global Networks of Knowledge* and Om Prakash's *The Dutch and English East India Companies: Trade in Indian Textiles in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*.[21] As can be inferred, entities of comparison have been found within the domain of the VOC itself, or have involved evaluating the VOC in relation to other European maritime empires.

19 Leonard Blussé, *Tribuut aan China. Vier eeuwen Nederlands-Chinese betrekkingen* (Amsterdam 1989); Cees Brouwer, *Cauwa ende comptanten: De Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie in Jemen* (Amsterdam 1988); Aad van Amstel, *Barbaren, rebellen en mandarijnen: De VOC in de slag met China in de Gouden Eeuw* (Amsterdam 2011); Hoang Anh Tuan, *Silk for Silver: Dutch-Vietnamese relations, 1637-1700* (Leiden 2007).

20 James Belich, John Darwin and Chris Wickam (eds.), *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford 2016) 11.

21 Bob Moore and Henk van Nierop (eds.), *Colonial Empires Compared* (Aldershot 2003); Karel Davids, 'Dutch and Spanish Global Networks of Knowledge in the Early Modern Period: Structures, Changes and Limitations.' Paper presented at the International Workshop Iberian-Netherlandish Knowledge Exchanges, Barcelona, Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 27-28 November 2009. https://research.vu.nl/ws/portalfiles/portal/2502404/227843.pdf; Om Prakash, 'The Dutch and English East India Companies Trade in Indian Textiles in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Comparative View', in: Maxine Berg and Felicia Gottman (eds.), *Goods from the East, 1600-1800* (London 2015) 183-194.

In recent years moreover, there has been a tendency to frame the global as the 'global Dutch' i.e. comparing phenomena in the worlds of the VOC, WIC and the Dutch Republic. Some examples are Catia Antunes and Jos Gommans' *Exploring the Dutch Empire* and Matthias van Rossum and Kemp's *Desertion in the Early Modern World*.[22]

It goes without saying that comparative histories within the rubric of the VOC and the wider Dutch world bodes well for our understandings of the Company, Dutch globalisation and imperial history. However, a path less trodden and one that I believe comes with immense potential is to compare the VOC with its non-European counterparts. If using the framework of empire, one possibility would be to compare the Dutch Empire not so much with the usual suspects, such as the Portuguese, English, or even the French which has indeed been the dominant practice, but with the Mughal, Ottoman, Qing or even empires in other parts of the world.[23] The questions that can be asked could relate to broad themes about landed versus maritime empires or more streamlined ones about imperial imagination and identity, decline, rebellion, disease or even otherness.[24] A recent study which is particularly promising in this regard is Jos Gommans' article *South Asian Cosmopolitanisms*, which is a comparison on a micro-scale of the cosmopolitanism of Asia's court-ruled cities with the Dutch East India Company's policies of urban segregation in its settlements.[25] This article provides interesting food for thought, not merely in context of comparisons that can be undertaken, but also regarding the issue of scale.

Connected histories

The experimentation with connected history in the context of VOC histories has been a bare minimum. It is perhaps this trend that has caused Remco

22 Catia Antunes and Jos Gommans (eds.), *Exploring the Dutch Empire: Agents, Networks and Institutions, 1600-2000* (London 2015); Matthias van Rossum and Jeanette Kemp (eds.), *Desertion in the Early Modern World: A Comparative History* (New York 2016).

23 I have used the recommendations that feature in Mrinalini Sinha, 'Projecting Power: Empires, Colonies, and World History', in: Douglas Northrop (ed.), *A Companion to World History* (Singapore 2015) 258-271. A good example of the kind of comparative history I propose is Dennis Flynn, 'Comparing the Tokagawa Shogunate with Habsburg Spain: Two Silver-Based Empires in a Global Setting', in: James Tracy (ed.), *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade, 1350-1750*. Studies in Comparative Early Modern History (Cambridge 1991) 332-359.

24 I here draw on some of the themes of the Eurasian Empires paper which is part of the undergraduate curriculum at the University of Oxford. See footnote 1.

25 Jos Gommans, 'South Asian Cosmopolitanisms 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) 3-27.

Raben to lament ruefully that 'the connectedness of Company' is a grossly understudied domain in VOC history.[26] His estimation still rings true today. There is substantial literature on the traffic of commodities, information, luxury articles, art, knowledge, people and ideas and their impact from Asia to Europe and vice versa, ranging from Harold Cook's *Matters of Exchange* to the recent edited volume, *Mediating Netherlandish Art and Material Culture in Asia*, yet, circulation within the Indian Ocean World has received little attention outside its commodity trade.[27]

One of the principal challenges, also echoed by the discussions on New Imperial History in the last decade, has been to level the divide between center and periphery. In the context of the Dutch East India Company, it has meant de-emphasising the metropole, conceived either as the Dutch Republic or Batavia, and focusing on realms that have been perceived as existing on the margins.[28] Another feature has been to revive the Indian Ocean as a frame of analysis and thereby breaching the faulty Asia-Africa divide which has crept into histories of the VOC. Kerry Ward's *Networks of Empire* has often been regarded as groundbreaking in this regard, as it engages with the theme of circulation by studying the traffic of forced labour between Batavia and Cape Town.[29] Other histories of mobility between various Company settlements have followed on the heels of Ward's study, such as Linda Mbeki and Matthias van Rossum's *Private Slave Trade in the Dutch Indian Ocean World*.[30] So, when contemplating ways in which global histories can be written using VOC archives, the first point to be made is that several connected histories of the Indian Ocean World are waiting to be written.[31] Connected histories do not only plot movement, but they can also reveal commonalities in realms usually regarded as incommensurable. Deborah Hutton and Rebecca Tucker evoke this idea in their article on the itinerant seventeenth-century Dutch painter, Cornelis Heda.[32] They show that Heda's curious travels to explore his career

26 Remco Raben, 'A New Dutch Imperial History? Perambulations in a Prospective Field', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* 128:1 (2013) 5-30.

27 Harold Cook, *Matters of Exchange: Commerce, Medicine, and Science in the Dutch Golden Age* (New Haven 2007); Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Michael North (eds.), *Mediating Netherlandish Art and Material Culture in Asia* (Amsterdam 2014).

28 Raben, 'A New Dutch Imperial History?'

29 See Raben's discussion about Ward's work as an example of exploring the connectedness of the Indian Ocean World. Raben, 'A New Dutch Imperial History?'

30 Linda Mbeki and Matthias van Rossum, 'Private Slave Trade in the Dutch Indian Ocean World: A Study into the Networks and Backgrounds of the Slavers and the Enslaved in South Asia and South Africa', *Slavery & Abolition* 38:1 (2017) 95-116.

31 Another example of a connected history in the legal context is Alicia Schrikker and Dries Lyna, 'Threads of the Legal Web: Dutch Law and Everyday Colonialism in Eighteenth Century Asia', in: Griet Vermeesch, Manon van der Heijden and Jaco Zuiderduijn (eds.), *The Uses of Justice in Global Perspective, 1600-1900* (New York 2019) 42-56.

32 Deborah Hutton and Rebecca Tucker, 'The Worldly Artist in the 17th century: Cornelis Claesz. Heda and his Travels from Haarlem to Bijapur', *Art History* 37:5 (2014) 1-30.

prospects at the courts of Prague, Isfahan and Bijapur can only make sense if one understands that the artistic tastes and practices of patronage in these imperial spaces were similar.

Connected history is not without its critics. The first and principle worry of historians is that connected histories can belittle, obscure or erase the issue of power.[33] Clearly, this need not be the case. The movement of individuals, communities, commodities and ideas can and should be able to reveal the role and play of power. Secondly, as Ann McGarth reminds us, 'global approaches should not necessarily imply that all routes and journeys became enduring connections. Global relevancies will also include isolations, ruptures, and other disconnects'.[34] We, as historians, should therefore recognise that interaction was a messy affair and be wary of embracing a linear view of interaction where it is thought to occasion greater closeness only. Thirdly, historians note that connected history can privilege histories of interaction and mobility at the cost of people and places for which early modern globalisation had little relevance. As a consequence, just as we have for long underestimated the nature of encounter that some places experienced, we could just as easily fall into the trap of privileging those who felt and revealed the effects of early modern interactions the most.[35] This undoubtedly is a relevant argument which underscores the limits of globalization in the period. This failing of connected history can be remedied by the comparative method where the onus is not so much on connections. Moreover, the histories of connectedness that we have written, whether we speak in terms of renegades who cross religious and political boundaries in seventeenth-century Java or commodities which find different uses in different parts of the world, are few and far between to do justice to the kind of archives we possess from the period.

I will briefly revisit my published doctoral dissertation *Staging Asia* in the context of the proposals I make.[36] My research revealed a fascinating history of the movement of information and ideas from Asia to Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. For the sake of brevity, it will suffice to say it is a Company centered history where I examined the role of the VOC in information manufacture and transfer. Although I contemplated the difference in information flows in South Asia, Banten and (in the context of China) Taiwan, this was secondary to my study of how the Dutch East

33 See O'Brien, 'Historiographical Traditions and Modern Imperatives'.

34 Ann McGarth cited in: Sebouh David Aslanian, Joyce E. Chaplin, Ann McGrath and Kristin Mann, 'AHR *Conversation*: How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History', *The American Historical Review* 118:5 (2013) 1461. https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/118.5.1431.

35 Frederick Cooper, 'What is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian's Perspective', *African Affairs* 100:399 (2001) 189.

36 Manjusha Kuruppath, *Staging Asia: The Dutch East India Company and the Amsterdam Theatre* (Leiden 2016).

India Company shaped and conveyed knowledge about episodes of regime change in these realms to readers in Europe. Given the nature of the source material available on the subject, more probing questions can be asked about information flows in Mughal India and Banten and considered alongside that of the VOC. Similarly, the history of the Persian ruler Nadir Shah Afshahar, which constitutes a chapter in my book, can in fact become the basis of a connected history. His military victories against the great empires in the day, the Ottomans and the Mughals, in the 1730s provoked the reaction of observers in various parts of Europe and Asia. In Europe, he became the subject of accounts written in Italian, Dutch and English. And in South Asia, letters exchanged between Lahore, Delhi and Bengal carried details of his invasions. I am inclined to believe that several other cataclysmic political changes in the period, like the fall of the Ming dynasty, would have elicited similar responses in various geographical and social contexts.

Global history encourages us to ask new questions and pursue new lines of research, but it invariably throws up many practical challenges. It asks that we transcend our regional specialisms. More importantly, and in order to escape a reliance on secondary sources, global history can often involve the use of multilingual source material. For instance, the writing of comparative or connected histories of the Mughals and the Dutch would require the use of Persian source material. Historians can and have creatively overcome this impediment through the use of available translations and translations commissioned specifically for the purpose of one's research. Additionally, global history, in the demands it makes on the knowledge and language competencies of historians, can encourage or even necessitate collaboration between historians. The potential of Dutch archival sources is also such that they sometimes provide access to local source material in translation. In chronicling Nadir Shah's invasion of Delhi in 1739 for instance, the Dutch archives carry letters drawing from various parts of South Asia authored by commoners and courts. So clearly, language impediments need not always present an obstacle, so long as we are aware of the possibility of fabrication, the intentions of the Company in acquiring and translating material, the changes that the information can undergo owing to the process of translation itself, and as Remco Raben has pertinently noted, the imputation of this information into 'categories' that the Company is familiar with. Thirdly, and here I draw on Raben's insightful reflections, how do we use local source material alongside VOC sources? This question is not only relevant for global historians, but also for historians of all stripes. Very often, local sources contrast VOC records in genre, nature of composition wherein some sources are shown to transition more slowly from orality to the written word and the purpose of composition. For example, the Sajarah Banten Kecil, a history in verse about the succession feud in Banten in 1682, was only compiled in the nineteenth century. It is furthermore an amalgamation of history and myth, fact and fiction. I wonder if we will be able to make better use of such local

sources if we altered the questions we posed. What if it was not, as Raben puts it, 'the reconstruct(ion) of details of the events' we were after? What if we instead recognised both VOC records and indigenous sources as different ways of remembering the past and posed the questions of what constituted the past for these sources and how the past was remembered differently? I suppose there are no easy answers here, but this issue is certainly worth thinking about.

To conclude, I hope to have made a case for the fact that VOC histories need new purpose and new attire and that global history is a fitting one.

Manjusha Kuruppath is an early modern historian who presently teaches at Pembroke College, Oxford. Her dissertation, defended at the University of Leiden, was published in 2016 as a book titled *Staging Asia: The Dutch East India Company and the Amsterdam Theatre, c. 1650 to 1780*.