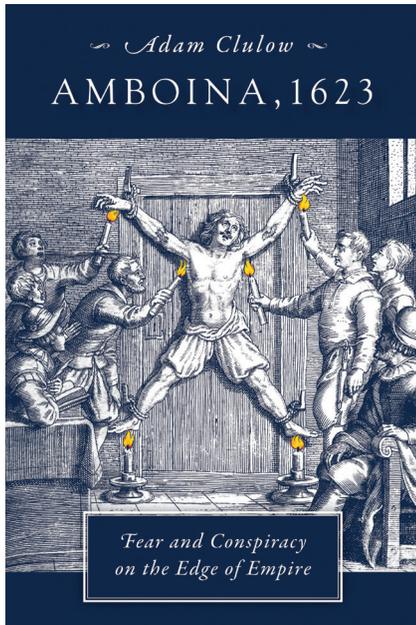


Review

Adam Clulow, *Amboina, 1623. Fear and Conspiracy on the Edge of Empire*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, 289 pp. ISBN 9780231175128.

Pieter C. Emmer and Jos J.L. Gommans, *The Dutch Overseas Empire, 1600-1800*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 465 pp. ISBN 9781108428378.



In recent years, Dutch colonial history has become a prominent topic in the public debate in the Netherlands, not least as regards the moral and cultural implications of the early modern Dutch empire – for example in discussions on the legacy of slavery or the appropriateness of the concept of a Dutch ‘Golden Age’. This development runs in parallel with a significant change of direction in recent historical scholarship on the early modern Dutch empire. For many decades, experts in early modern Dutch colonial history predominantly followed the route first taken in the period of decolonization, when scholars sought to steer away from the colonialist preoccupations of an earlier generation and attempted to pursue a more objective approach to their subject matter by riding the waves of cliometrics and substituting quantitative analyses in terms of shiploads, trade patterns, and migration flows, for qualitative

analyses in terms of politics, ideas, and culture. The result, to put it bluntly, was the counting of ships, supplies, and slaves. This approach has long remained dominant and continues to hold sway until this day – a clear example being the much-publicized research from 2019 on the economic weight of Atlantic slave-based activities in the Dutch Republic in 1770.¹

¹ Pepijn Brandon and Ulbe Bosma, ‘De betekenis van de Atlantische slavernij voor de Nederlandse economie in de tweede helft van de achttiende eeuw’, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geschiedenis* 16 (2019/2) 5-46.

However, new directions in international scholarship on colonial history have started to challenge the dominance of this quantitative approach. On the one hand, the rise of 'new imperial history' has generated renewed attention for qualitative issues relating to culture, morality, and identity in colonial history, specifically in a metropolitan context; on the other hand, the 'global turn' has spotlighted the variety of transimperial entanglements in the (early) modern world, not only from economic but also, if not especially, from political, cultural, and legal perspectives.

The two books discussed in this review exemplify these recent developments, albeit from opposite points of departure. Adam Clulow, who has been at the forefront of the global turn in Dutch colonial history with his work on Japan and the VOC in the seventeenth century, zooms in on a single case study, the infamous execution of twenty-one men in the VOC fortress on Amboina in 1623, to tell a larger story about the political, legal, and psychological dimensions of empire-building in early modern Asia. Piet Emmer and Jos Gommans, in the extended English version of their Dutch work *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld* (2012), take a wide, integrated approach to study the early modern Dutch empire in its entirety, juxtaposing Asia, Africa, and the Americas and including the impact of empire in the metropolis. Together, these two books show how novel perspectives that avoid the pitfalls of more conventional narratives can provide important new insights on early modern Dutch colonial history.

In *Amboina, 1623*, Clulow, who teaches at the University of Texas at Austin, sets out to unravel the developments that led to the 'massacre' in Amboina, one of the most famous – and notorious – episodes in the history of the VOC. While traditional accounts, from John Dryden's tragedy from 1673 to Giles Milton's bestselling *Nathaniel's Nutmeg* from 1999, have told and retold the story of treason, torture, and trial in much intricate but also distorted detail, Clulow goes back to the basis, diving into the available primary source material to situate the alleged conspiracy against the VOC and the subsequent trial and execution in its specific historical context. Thanks to his formidable linguistic skills and his detached, perceptive reading of the sources, Clulow excels in teasing out the various dimensions at play in the episode, connecting the Dutch and English perspectives with the Japanese and Southeast Asian contexts that are crucial for a full understanding of what happened exactly on Amboina in 1623. The result is a truly masterful account of the background, progression, and outcomes of the massacre, with significant implications for our understanding of the VOC in Asia and early modern empire in general.

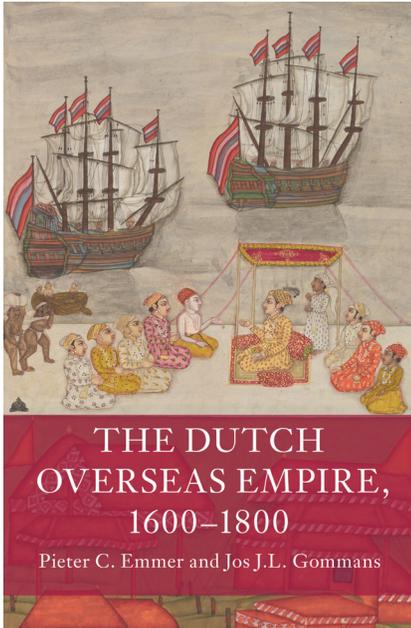
Two elements of his analysis determine Clulow's accomplishment. First, he starts with deliberately zooming out from the controversial legal proceedings of the Amboina trial, which have dominated the existing accounts of the massacre in English and Dutch scholarship, to reach a fuller overview of the historical and geographical setting in which the VOC officials in Amboina started to believe they were threatened by a conspiracy. This choice allows Clulow to replace the traditional European focus on the controversy with a more comprehensive Southeast Asian perspective. Discussing the rising tensions in the area as the VOC interfered in existing trading networks, Clulow carefully reconstructs how VOC officials attempted to enforce their will through policies of massive destruction, violence (most extremely perpetrated in the Banda islands in 1621), and resettlement through

the importation of slaves, particularly from the Coromonadel coast. While Clulow thus shows the wide impact of VOC rule on people and places in the Moluccas and beyond, his portrayal of the VOC remains far removed from the traditional depiction of a powerful trading company that deftly imposed its control over the area. Instead, Clulow underlines the sense of powerlessness of VOC officials in Amboina who, facing turbulence, uncertainty, and crisis, became overwhelmed by fear that they were surrounded by a world full of lurky conspirators.

The second strength of Clulow's analysis is the measured and informed way in which he subsequently examines the day-to-day progression of the trial and its protracted aftermath. With a keen eye for legal intricacies and the intertwinements between law, psychology, and propaganda, Clulow avoids the trap of choosing sides and convincingly discusses the crucial role in the trial of Isaaq de Bruyn, the recently appointed advocate-fiscal of the VOC on Amboina, whose combination of ambition and incompetence proved fatal for any orderly legal proceedings and hence for the twenty-one men that were accused of conspiracy and subsequently executed. The blunders and inconsistencies of the process, however, would soon be erased by both English and Dutch attempts to steer public opinion: while the six English survivors of the trial contributed upon their return to England to a propagandistic campaign that depicted the trial as a deliberate, methodical act of torture and murder, Dutch officials who sought to launder any signs of judicial incompetence essentially confirmed this portrayal of an orderly and systematic process. The result, as Clulow rightly emphasises, was that the Amboina case became detached from the concrete Southeast Asian environment in which it originated and that the VOC came to be considered as an authoritative, rational power that could bend the world to its will.

It is the principal merit of Clulow's study that he persuasively deconstructs this narrative of a domineering VOC without neglecting the severe and structural consequences of VOC rule in the Moluccas. Precisely because he revisits from a fresh perspective issues such as authority and legality that were central to the colonialist preoccupations of historians from before the Second World War, Clulow succeeds in upending any notion that the VOC was a confident, orderly organization driven by systematic commercial rationale – a notion that has long remained dominant because of the post-war approach of economic historians and their predilection for quantitative data. Highlighting the brutality of VOC policies but also the feelings of vulnerability and anxiety that beset company officials, Clulow compellingly interprets the VOC as an imperial power that, like other empires, was haunted by fear.

The spice islands of the Moluccas of course also feature prominently in *The Dutch Overseas Empire*, the wide-ranging overview written by Piet Emmer and Jos Gommans, whose combined efforts embody the thriving tradition of scholarship on early modern Dutch colonial history at Leiden University. The book offers a suitable counterweight to Clulow's as it pursues a truly global perspective, integrating the oft-separated histories of Dutch empire in Asia and the Atlantic within a single framework that also includes the metropolis. With this broad, synthetic approach, Emmer and Gommans explicitly aim to follow in the footsteps of Charles Boxer's seminal *The Dutch Seaborne Empire* from 1965. This ambition alone is already worthy of praise, and so are specific parts of the volume



that succeed in going beyond Boxer's account by showing how the development of Dutch empire depended on internal factors and geopolitical circumstances beyond Dutch control – not least in the peripheries of the Indonesian archipelago such as Amboina.

Emmer and Gommans start their overview with an analysis of the institutional histories of the VOC and WIC, rightly pointing out that the strong links between the governing bodies of both companies, filled by members of the same network of elite families in the Dutch Republic, vindicate the conception of a single Dutch empire. Subsequently, the authors embark on a discussion of the 'empire at home', connecting data on the economic impact of empire in the metropolis with an exploration of the cultural implications of the confrontations with other civilizations worldwide. Here, the analysis becomes somewhat imbalanced, not least because the authors waver between a narrow

interpretation of empire in the economic context, and a very broad notion of empire in the cultural sphere. It remains unclear, for example, to what extent the development of philological interest in oriental languages, such as the mid-seventeenth-century vogue for the work of the Persian poet Saadi, was a direct consequence of the Dutch empire as an institutional structure or rather part of a wider phenomenon of cultural entanglement within the international Republic of Letters. In other words, the authors' conception of empire lacks the clarity of focus needed for comprehensively linking the political, economic, and cultural domains.

The implications hereof become manifest in the second part, which focuses on the Atlantic world. While this part seeks to connect the contexts of New Netherland, the Caribbean, Dutch Brazil, West Africa, and the Cape Colony, it suffers not only from a rambling structure, with frequent repetitions and unwarranted intervals in the argument, but also from a myopic vision on quantifiable data, resulting in a rather curious, old-fashioned strand of economic determinism. The authors state for example that there was little migration from the Dutch Republic to the Americas whereas England 'managed to delay the use of the slave trade' (132) through the system of contract migration – as if the slave trade was a natural outcome of a teleological process. Indeed, while ample attention is being paid to slavery in the Dutch Atlantic, it is generally discussed as a purely economic phenomenon in terms of supply and demand, as a given reality that did not involve any personal or institutional decision-making. Thus, the deliberate choice of the WIC to fully enter the transatlantic slave trade in coastal West Africa in the 1630s is summarised simply as: 'After the conquest of a part of Brazil, the demand for slaves increased' (215). This narrow conception of the market as the single driving force with no room for individual agency is

aggravated by the disregard of other factors at play, such as religion. Indeed, much of the recent rich work on the political, cultural, and religious dimensions of the Dutch Atlantic, for example the studies by Mark Meuwese and Danny Noorlander, is conspicuously neglected. The result is an overview that seems to have remained stuck in the scholarship of some decades ago, with a typically outdated tendency to evaluate the Dutch empire as a question of success and failure, in terms of 'what a small country was capable of' (126).

Yet the book by Emmer and Gommans enters a different and much more valuable line of analysis in the third part, which surveys the Dutch empire in Asia. This part offers a very lucid discussion of the bewildering variety of VOC territories, settlements, and trading posts, usefully subdivided under three categories: the 'Dutch Tropics', including the Indonesian archipelago, Ceylon, and Malabar; the Indian Ocean, including Coromandel, Surat and the Arabian Sea, and Bengal; and the South China Sea, including China and Taiwan, Japan, and the scattered VOC outposts in Patani, Siam, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Burma. It is here that the book reaches an admirably broad comparative scope. Discussing the various political, economic, cultural, and intellectual intertwinements between the VOC and Asian sovereigns and societies, it shows the extent to which the VOC adapted to existing patterns and how the possibilities for VOC expansion depended on a range of local agents and circumstances, such as the open structure of statehood in Southeast Asia, summarised in the concept of *mandala*, or the crucial role of Indian brokers on the Coromandel and Malabar coasts. Moreover, the comparative lens of this third part allows for the drawing of a series of interesting parallels between the VOC and Asian states such as the Mughal empire, which, like the VOC, originated as a mobile force that developed into a military power. This insight, which results from an open, investigative view of transimperial connections and comparisons, demonstrates how new approaches to the political and cultural aspects of empire can substantially add to our understanding of Dutch colonial history in a global context, opening up fields that the long-dominant economic approach has left untouched.

The strengths and shortcomings of *The Dutch Overseas Empire*, then, aptly indicate the development of scholarship on the early modern Dutch colonial empire. Together with Clulow's *Amboina, 1623*, the book shows the multiplicity of contexts and agents that gave shape to the Dutch empire as a global phenomenon, revealing how the Dutch companies for colonial trade developed into powerful institutions that, at the same time, remained dependent on powers beyond their control. As Clulow notes, 'colonial regimes were a strange melding of power and a sense of powerlessness' (197). It is this combination of factors that can serve to further explore the history of early modern Dutch empire, going beyond the traditional explanatory schemes framed in the colonialist terms of success and failure or in the economic terms of growth and contraction – with obvious implications as well for the place of Dutch colonial history in the public debate.

Arthur Weststeijn, Università degli Studi di Padova