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Citation

Hägerdal, H. (2006). Colonial rivalry and the partition of Timor. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/12718

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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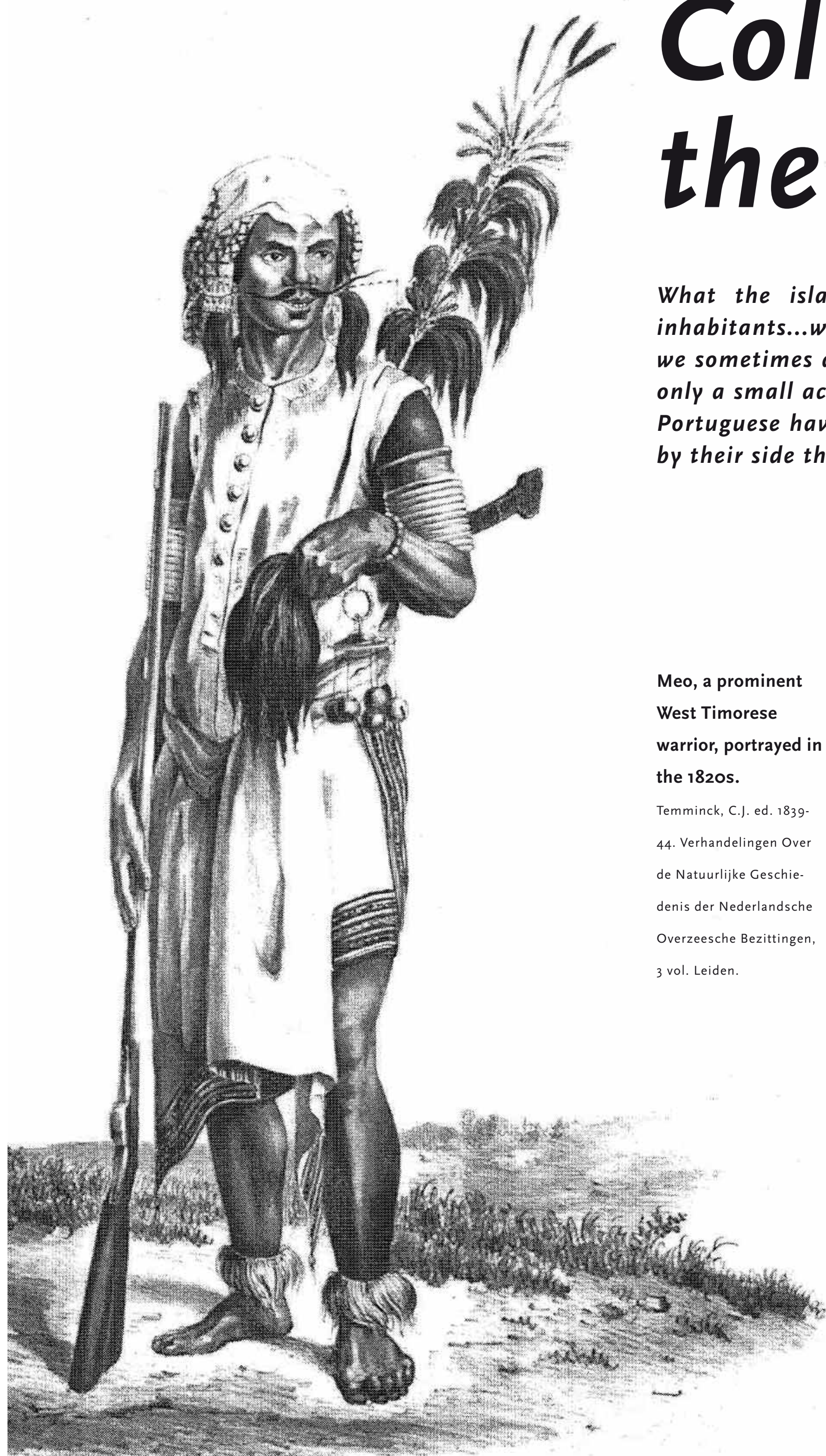
Colonial rivalry and the partition of Timor

What the islands deliver is in the first place sandalwood, and also some gold and beeswax.... The inhabitants...who often wage war on each other, sometimes draw the Company into the game..., the reason why we sometimes achieve some slaves.... But since the relation with Portugal is at peace again...we have and keep only a small activity on Timor as well as Solor, pending the small trade that is done here, and also because the Portuguese have drawn everything to themselves, being by far the strongest and mostly having the inhabitants by their side through their priests and divines, and by those means taking much advantage over us.[1]



Meo, a prominent West Timorese warrior, portrayed in the 1820s.
Temminck, C.J. ed. 1839-44. Verhandelingen Over de Natuurlijke Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Overzeesche Bezittingen, 3 vol. Leiden.

Hans Hägerdal

Pieter van Dam's words, taken from his voluminous study of the Dutch East Indies Company (around 1700),[2] may surprise a modern reader. At the time of writing, the Company, or VOC, was at the height of its administrative and commercial efficiency and had explored all commercial opportunities in the region during the preceding century. Still, the judgment of van Dam rings with diffidence toward the Portuguese, who had been expelled from the Malay Peninsula in 1641 and relegated from Makassar in 1660, but here stand out as a powerful entity in the Timor region.

The stubborn resilience of the Portuguese in what was perhaps their most inaccessible overseas domain raises a number of questions. How were they able to dominate large parts of Timor and (until 1859) the surrounding islands in the face of the much better-equipped and organised Dutch? What did Timor mean to the Portuguese network in Asia? What were the decisive stages in the division of Timor, whose consequences are apparent to this day? The resilience of the Portuguese authority in East Timor has been characterised as a miracle, but it might be more fitting to call it a 'paradox'. The Portuguese presence, for all its problems and perceived exploitative features, was in the end able to implement symbols and perceptions that in more recent history thwarted the Indonesian integrationist project. Portuguese representatives on Timor were frequently on the brink of expulsion, obliteration or resignation, but nonetheless hung on until 1975.

How did they get there in the first place?

The origins of the Dutch-Portuguese bipartition of Timor have recently been addressed by Arend de Roever (2002).[3] In his thesis, de Roever contextualises Timor by tracing the importance of the sandalwood trade that opened the island to the evolving commercial networks of the 16th and 17th centuries. In this way Timor, for all its marginality, became a part of the developing and increasingly interlinked world system (described by, for example, Immanuel Wallerstein).[4] At the same time he points out the limits of contact dictated by Timor's geography. Winds and currents make its coasts inaccessible for much of the year, while its mountainous and dry interior limits manpower resources and food production. De Roever argues that the Dutch could very well have eliminated Portuguese influence in Timor after 1613 but failed to do so owing to other priorities in central Indonesia. Thus the VOC provided the Portuguese with several decades of breathing room. When the VOC resumed its interest in Timor in the mid-17th century, they found that the Portuguese could not be dislodged.

All this deserves to be the subject of an in-depth study of how indigenous societies responded to the impact of early modern colonialism (16th to 18th centuries), and how they participated in the processes that led to the rough 50-50 partition of Timor known to modern history. The annual records of the VOC post in Kupang in West Timor constitute a comprehensive body of material from the 1650s to the 1790s. The Portuguese material is less well-preserved but includes a substantial number of partly-published clerical and secular sources of the 16th century and later. Timorese oral traditions, recorded since the 19th century, can be used from a posthumous perspective to clarify how events or processes were perceived by indigenous groups.

Colonial seeds of division

From these materials a few points can be made, which may be elaborated by future research. First, the localisation of the Portuguese group clearly explains much of their resilience. This is by no means unique to the Timorese situation; Malyn Newitt (2005) has recently stressed the role of mestiço populations in the preservation of various Portuguese domains in Africa and Asia.[5] It has also been pointed out that such communities were in themselves important prerequisites to engaging with local populations in trade and diplomacy. The Topasses, or Black Portuguese, a mestiço community, established a martial and self-confident culture in Larantuka (East Flores) and Timor in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. They were so firmly attached to Dominican fathers that they resisted attempts to introduce Jesuit fathers into the region. In letters, Topass leaders consistently appear as good Catholic subjects of the King of Portugal, though it is clear that they at the same time pursued their own political ways and adopted (or rather inherited) many local customs.

By the late 17th century the Topasses dominated most of Timor, save for an enclave around Kupang where the Dutch led a precarious existence. Topass leaders were able to profit from the trade of sandalwood and other commodities, such as beeswax and slaves, capitalising on the 1661 Dutch-Portuguese peace treaty. Portuguese Macau was the main economic channel to the outside world. The Topass elite consolidated the many minor Timorese principalities by way of matrimonial alliances, the establishment of minor 'colonies', and outright threats. The Dutch adversaries were often stunned by the power that Portuguese and Catholic symbols of authority possessed over the local Timorese aristocrats, given the rather superficial dissemination of Catholicism. Sources hint that the locals incorporated such symbols in their own universe of connotations. The concept of hegemony might be applicable to the situation of Portuguese Timor to a certain extent – a system where opposition and difference are not overtly repressed but rather co-opted in a social order.

Until a century ago colonial 'rule' on Timor was a matter of indirect governance. The number of whites in the Portuguese trading port of Lifau, in West Timor, was no more than 50 in 1689, and the number of Dutch burgers in Kupang was likewise limited. For the Portuguese and Dutch alike, it was essential to bind local aristocracies to their interests through institutionalised exchange of gifts or goods. Over the three centuries of colonial intrusion, the resources and organisational structure of Timorese principalities, far from remaining in a pristine, changeless state, were transformed by the dissemination of firearms and the changing fortunes of the sandalwood trade.

East and west and why

This localised order constructed during the 17th century was disrupted by the persistent attempts of the Portuguese *Estado da India* (Indian administration) to integrate Timor in its own hierarchy beginning in 1702. For long periods in the 18th century a bitter struggle raged between Topass leaders and centrally-appointed administrators, in which local principalities became entangled. Finally, in 1769, the official governor had to leave Lifau, the traditional Portuguese stronghold in West Timor, and establish a new residence in Dili in the east. Only in the 1780s did a reconciliation between the Topasses and the governor take place. By then, however, trade with Macau had begun to decline due to insecure conditions on the island. A consequence of the shift from Lifau to Dili was a rough division of colonial spheres of interest reflected on today's map. The colonialists established closer contact with the eastern principalities that had hitherto been rather vaguely dependent. Meanwhile, the remaining Topass-dominated area transformed into the Oecusse Ambeno enclave, which, although situated in western Timor, today belongs to Timor Leste.

A second factor in the story of Timor's division is Dutch cautiousness. The trading post of Kupang, founded in 1653, was an almost constantly troubled post, and seems to have been maintained in order to keep an eye on the Portuguese. Surrounded by three (and later five) small but loyal allied principalities, the Dutch staged three ambitious military campaigns against Portuguese clients in the 1650s, which ended dismally. After that, they remained on the defensive for almost a century. Dutch residents were instructed not to interfere in internal Portuguese disputes but rather to 'let them both jump in the bay'. Portugal's close affiliation to Britain after the 1703 Methuen Treaty apparently reinforced the VOC's commitment to relieving diplomatic strain. Nevertheless, this period ended with a major Topass invasion of VOC lands in 1749; in the well-known battle of Penfui, the Topasses and their clients were slaughtered in the thousands by a small 'Dutch' force (that included very few whites).

After Penfui one can discern a brief period of Dutch expansionism. Numerous principalities on the western half of the island changed allegiance almost overnight. Though some of them soon strayed from the Dutch cause, this was an important stage in the shaping of the political map of modern Timor. VOC ambitions were at their height in 1761, when the resident Hans Albrecht von Plüskow wished to use internal Portuguese dissension to once and for all establish Dutch authority throughout the unruly island. The attempt was not quite endorsed by Batavia and misfired badly; Von Plüskow was murdered by the Topasses and the whole enterprise immediately imploded. Subsequent residents had little power or energy to deal with the various rebellions, or the machinations of the Portuguese, as it was a time of general financial and administrative decline for the VOC.

Thus by the time of the dissolution of the VOC in 1799, the situation was as follows. In East Timor, an economically weak but moderately stabilised colonial apparatus managed to co-opt a weakened Topass community. In West Timor a fragile outpost of a crumbling colonial empire desperately tried to keep self-willed local principalities within their alliance system. In spite of British intervention during the Napoleonic era, this rough division of power lasted henceforth, and was cemented through Dutch-Portuguese diplomatic agreements in 1851, 1859 and 1916. <

Notes

1. Dam, Pieter van. 1931. *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*. Vol. II:1. 's-Gravenhage: M. Nijhoff. p. 258.
2. Ibid.
3. Roever, Arend de. 2002. *De Jacht op Sandelhout. De VOC en de Tweedeling van Timor in de Zeventiende Eeuw*. Zutphen: Walburg Pers.
4. Wallerstein, Immanuel. 1974-1989. *The Modern World System*. Vol. 1-3. New York: Academic Press.
5. Newitt, Malyn. 2005. *A History of Portuguese Overseas Expansion, 1400-1668*. London: Routledge.

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