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Decay or defeat ? : an inquiry into the Portuguese decline in Asia 1580-1645

Veen, Ernst van

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PREFACE

It is a law of nature that chaos is continuously on the increase. One does not need to be a scientist to recognize this, but as one gets older it becomes more difficult to cope with the phenomenon. In comparison, the past, however disintegrated it may appear, looks much easier to comprehend. This probably explains why, with age, people become more interested in history.

At least, it was a need for 'understanding' the past that drove me, after my retirement, to enroll at the history department of Leiden University. Although I did not find the simplicity and transparency I had expected, it became a great experience, to be recommended to anybody who has the time, a certain degree of discipline and the perseverance to make it to the end. During my travels in Asia I had seen many remnants of the Portuguese and Dutch colonial past and it was therefore logical to choose the relationships between the two 'nations' and the decline of the Portuguese 'empire' as a subject for further study.

For this thesis, I had to work through many documents from the Dutch archives and a relatively small corpus of Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish historiography. In putting the data together I saw few signs that the past would indeed have been less chaotic than the present. In fact, I think I discovered my limits in coping with chaos. The historiographies of the 'colonial' past are interwoven with paradigms and myths and hardly ever do chroniclers or even modern authors agree on the sequence and significance of events, or on the motivations of the people and their institutions. Getting rid of the contradictions and finding the logic behind decisions, actions and their outcome, became a major task.

According to the rules of Leiden University I am not allowed to mention the names of the people of the history department who supported me and gave me very helpful advice. Sometimes, and at first sight, their remarks seemed to be only marginal, but on further consideration they were quite essential

in redirecting my thinking on the subject. During my working life I never had much time for iteration and therefore, this was good experience and I thank them for that.

In the second place I am indebted to the staff of the *Gemeente Archief* of Amsterdam and the *Algemeen Rijks Archief* in The Hague. They were always very helpful.

Thirdly, I thank my family and friends who never stopped asking me: 'that book of yours, is it ever going to be finished?'. Amongst them I like to mention in particular my late mother who about a year ago, after her first stroke, at the age of ninety-one, still had the guts to tell me to get on with the job and finish it! And I have to be honest about this: where curiosity sometimes fell short, the fear of failure took over.

In the fourth place I thank the people who in one way or another helped to get the book in its final form; amongst them George Winius, who read the whole manuscript in its initial stage. His comments with respect to contents and transparency were most valuable. Francisco Contente Domingues of the University of Lisbon arranged for the Portuguese translation of the summary by G. Ferreira.

Last but not least I thank my wife Janny, who, because of this 'inquiry', for so many years had to suffer my absent-mindedness and unsocial behaviour. Hopefully there will still be many more years to come wherein we can enjoy the present!

Finally, I dedicate this book to our grandchildren, present or still to come. May they live happily in the chaotic future that is ahead of them!

Wassenaar, 20 October 2000