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Spice War: Ternate, Makassar, the Dutch East India Company and the struggle for the Ambon Islands (c. 1600-1656)

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SUMMARY

Whereas there is an increasing public and scholarly awareness of the violent depopulation of the Banda Islands by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the period 1609-1621, in its attempts to obtain exclusive access to nutmeg, the wider conflicts over exclusive access to cloves that characterized the region for many subsequent decades remain underexplored by comparison. In this dissertation, Tristan Mostert aims to show the evolution of these wider seventeenth century spice wars as they were shaped by the physical land- and seascape of the Ambon islands, and the political dynamics of the region at large, from the arrival of the first Dutch ships in the eastern archipelago until the durable imposition of colonial control over Ambon, Hoamoal and the adjacent islands by 1656.

The dissertation first introduces the complex island world in which the conflicts took place, both in terms of its physical environment of which the unique features would put their mark on the nature of warfare in the region, and the political environment that had taken shape in the region before the first arrival of Dutch ships there in 1599. It proceeds to explore the first contacts with the VOC and its precursors, specifically considering the wider effects of the first treaties concluded with Hitu, Banda, Ternate, and several of the latter's tributaries from 1605 onwards. Such treaties would be the cornerstone of the Company's monopoly policy, but also led to conflict in the Banda Islands and drew the Company into local power politics. Importantly, its alliance with Ternate, combined with the war it waged in Banda, brought the VOC into war with Gowa (Makassar), the upcoming power in South Sulawesi and emerging rival of Ternate, by 1615.

In the Ambon region, the escalating conflict in Banda and ever more stringent monopoly policies meanwhile bred increasing resentment against the Company's presence and regime, especially among the inhabitants of Hoamoal, a peninsula of the large island of Seram just north of Ambon, nominally ruled by the sultan of Ternate. This led to the first major military escalation of the conflict in the wake of the arrival of the Nassau Fleet, a Dutch war fleet originally intended to target Spanish colonial possessions around the Pacific, which found its way to the Ambon region in 1625. Herman van Speult, the VOC governor in Ambon, in response to a series of hostilities in the preceding years, used this windfall military power to hold a large campaign around Hoamoal and its adjacent islands, targeting settlements, vessels and, most importantly, clove trees - the first clear instance of economic and environmental warfare by the VOC in the islands.

While the campaign intimidated the leaders of Hoamoal in the short run, it fed mutual distrust and hostility, giving rise to further subsequent conflict.

The dissertation explores the subsequent period with a wider geographical scope, primarily through the lens of the career of Kaicili Ali, a Ternaten prince who, after his failed bid for the throne, tried to carve out a power base for himself in the Ambon region. His personal story poignantly illustrates the way in which the Company's attempts to control the cloves from the Ambon region were tied up with the wider power dynamics in the region, especially those between Makassar and Ternate. These wider power dynamics are also explored by discussing some specific diplomatic interactions between the VOC, Gowa and Buton in the period 1617-1632, when the Company was in a state of cold war with Makassar but tried to retain open channels of communication with it in various ways, while Buton, which was affiliated with Ternate and the Company, was under continuing threat from Gowa.

Mostert then shifts the focus back to the Ambon region by investigating the governorships of Philip Lucasz (1628-1631) and Artus Gijssels (1631-1634). Particularly under the latter's leadership, the Company once again went openly on the offensive against Hoamoal and some of the other Muslim polities in the region. The rich documentation of this period as preserved in Gijssels's personal archive gives us an especially insightful look into the evolution of the scorched earth tactics and the reliance on indigenous subjects, allies and tactics the VOC developed. This increasing reliance on indigenous support also came with inherent risks, however, as became clear over the period 1634-1637, when the Company's control of the region threatened to unravel entirely. In the wake of the death of Hituese political leader Tepil, and his succession as kapitan Hitu by his son Kakiali, relations with the Company turned sour. War between the Company and most of the communities that comprised Hitu soon followed, bringing crisis to the heart Company's sphere of influence, as Hitu was situated on the island of Ambon proper and was formerly the Company's oldest ally in the region. In the subsequent conflict, the Company found most of the Muslim communities in the region up in arms against it. In its subsequent attempts to regain control, the Company made such heavy use of the local honggi fleets that it alienated its own subjects and allies as well: they revolted in 1636. It took a massive military intervention from Batavia, led by Governor-General Van Diemen, for the Company to regain a modicum of control in the region. Van Diemen made a follow-up visit to the region in 1638, hoping to durably resolve tensions and secure the monopoly. Meeting with Sultan Hamzah of Ternate, he recognized the latter's claims

on large swaths of the Ambon region in exchange for his continued assistance in maintaining the Company's clove monopoly. While both leaders were apparently pleased with this deal, it backfired in that it managed to alienate many of the leaders in the region against them both, leading to renewed conflict.

The subsequent period saw the first direct and concerted intervention by Makasar fleets and armies in the region. Responding to sustained diplomatic efforts from two of the most prominent leaders in the Ambon region, Kakiali on Hitu and kimelaha Luhuh on Hoamoal, the Gowa court sent a large war fleet in 1642, which intervened in both Hoamoal and Hitu but was ultimately unsuccessful. In the wake of the failed intervention, the Hoamoal peninsula was entirely brought under the control of Majjira, a Ternaten representative ostensibly well-disposed to the Company. The Hituese state, for its part, was dismantled and its territory brought under Company rule. The last bastion of Hituese resistance, the mountain fort of Kapahaha, held out until 1646, but was also ultimately conquered.

By 1647, then, the region was under firmer Company control than it had ever been. 1651, however, would see the outbreak of the most concerted and well-organised revolt against the Company regime yet. The resentment that developed in the intervening years can be explained by Company policies to further disempower the leadership of the region both economically and politically, combined with Christian missionizing in Ternaten-ruled areas which, although small in scale, was cause for particular ire and concern. It led to a coup against the Ternaten Sultan Mandarsyah in 1650 and a massive revolt in the Ambon region led by Majjira the next year. The subsequent military conflict is known as the Great Ambon or Great Hoamoal War (1651-1656), and can be considered the culmination of decades of conflict in the region, following established patterns in crucial ways. In the first two years of the war, the Company and its allies were able to regain some control over the region by a brutal campaign on Hoamoal which intimidated other polities into surrendering. Those opposed to the Company, however, once again enlisted Makasar help, leading to concerted Makasar intervention over the subsequent two years.

The VOC's commander during the campaign, Arnold de Vlaming van Oudshoorn, increasingly recognizing that the success of the Makasar intervention hinged on Gowa's various tributaries, vassals and staging areas, widened the scope of his own military actions accordingly, bringing Company troops to areas they had never before visited and giving the conflict a wide regional character towards its bloody conclusion. The period is also another clear illustration of

the environmental character of the war, in that the campaigns largely revolved around access to, and destruction of, food sources. Company troops and their local allies were ultimately able to starve out and defeat the remaining opposition against them. While offshoots of the conflict would go on for years so that it has no clear end point, this dissertation ends its investigation of the conflict in 1655, when resistance on Hoamoal was broken, to then consider the subsequent establishment of a particularly restrictive colonial order over Ambon, Hoamoal and the adjacent islands.

Mostert concludes by addressing the two main spearpoints of the dissertation: the wider power dynamics of the eastern archipelago, and the conduct of war in the challenging physical environment that the Ambon region presented. He emphasizes that in order to understand these conflicts, we need to investigate the European interests and policies in tandem with those of expanding local empires such as Gowa-Tallo (Makassar) and Ternate, and argues that if we mean to understand how the VOC ultimately achieved its clove monopoly, we should not primarily look for it in military factors in the narrow sense, but in its resource control and social engineering, in the form of sustained environmental destruction, forced resettlement and the deliberate dismantling of local political structures.