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Regulating relations: controlling sex and marriage in the early modern Dutch empire

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Propositions

- 1.** Sexual morality and family law were important political tools deployed in the construction and maintenance of a hierarchical social order in colonial societies across the early modern Dutch Empire.
- 2.** Dutch colonial authorities were never able to implement a consistent and straightforward normative framework governing sex and family life; instead, norms around intimacy were in large part shaped by the legal and extralegal actions of highly pluriform local populations.
- 3.** The inconsistency with which norms were applied across time, between settlements, and between demographic groups enabled colonial authorities to adapt to changing circumstances and build an enduring foundation of power for the chartered companies and their successors, their affiliated institutions, and for European colonial elites more broadly speaking.
- 4.** While norms around sex, marriage, and family should be seen through the multifocal lens of localized social complexity, viewing local conflicts around intimacy from different locations in conjunction with each other reveals that often remarkably similar patterns emerged from seemingly disconnected and disparate colonial societies, stemming from similar tensions around property, social order, and enslavement.
- 5.** An intersectional approach that interrogates the interactions between gender, ethnicity, class, religion, legal status, and other markers of social difference is indispensable for historians wishing to understand the dynamics of colonial societies.
- 6.** When taking a (partly) 'bottom up' perspective, the agency of individual actors in normative practices can fruitfully be expanded from the explicit and deliberate use of institutions to everyday practices and common or more infrequent but impactful criminalized behaviors.
- 7.** Sex and family life are not background events to world history, but key sites through which power and property arrangements are negotiated and reproduced. Their study should therefore not be confined to a separate field of 'gender history' or even to the larger fields of social and cultural history, but rather feature in the analytical toolbox of historians across disciplinary and methodological subdivisions.
- 8.** While empires such as the Dutch make for useful frameworks for approaching colonial encounters on a global scale, the salience of discrete 'national' empires as such should not be overstated. The Iberian, French, British, Dutch, and Scandinavian imperial projects can all be seen as highly interwoven, international, almost pan-European endeavors in which race- and class-based allegiances frequently mattered more than national origin.
- 9.** The past may proverbially be a foreign country, but it is not an alien planet. The truism that past values and ideas should be seen in the context of their own time is less useful than the question of what present ideas and practices grew out of them.
- 10.** Patterns of violence are extremely resilient: the types of sexual, domestic, and systemic violence experienced by marginalized people and particularly women today are eerily similar to those of the eighteenth century.