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7. Januari's Ghost¹: A Tale of Slavery, Sexuality, and Boyhood on Board a VOC Vessel

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Abstract: Can we imagine what historical records omit? If so, why should we? This chapter takes us back to the summer of 1769 and discusses an encounter between two boys, Steven and Januari, during a crossing from Batavia (Jakarta) to Ambon. Januari and Steven were young: one was eleven, the other fourteen; one was Black, the other white; one was enslaved, whilst the other was free. The boys will not have forgotten their encounter lightly, even though Januari later described it as playful. Steven and Januari were apprehended and charged with sodomy when they arrived in Ambon. Using historical records, this chapter (re-)constructs the moment of contact between Steven and Januari. The case illustrates why it is important to raise imaginative questions – in this case about love, sexuality, hierarchy, and abuse – even if the records do not provide clear-cut answers. Furthermore, it will show how present-day knowledge of sexual development in children, racial discourse, and criminal law practice can guide us in answering such questions. It is only through such a layered engagement with the past that we can construct a story that does justice to the historical experience of an enslaved boy like Januari.

Keywords: Ambon; Indonesia; slavery; sexuality; social hierarchy; race; eighteenth century

¹ This is a reworked and translated version of chapter four in my book *De vlinders van Boven-Digoel. Verborgene verhalen over kolonialisme* ('Butterflies from Boven-Digoel: Hidden Histories of Colonialism'; Schrikker 2021).

Jan Stelling: 'What were they doing there?'
 Januari van Souratte: 'We were playing.'
 Aboard the *Amerongen*, off the coast of Ambon, 1769²

Introduction

Can we imagine what historical records omit? If so, why should we? This chapter takes us back to the summer of 1769 and discusses an encounter between two boys, Januari and Steven, during a crossing from Batavia (Jakarta) to Ambon. Januari and Steven were young: one was eleven, the other fourteen; one was Black, the other white; one was enslaved, whilst the other was free. The boys will not have forgotten their encounter lightly, even though Januari later described it as playful. Using historical records, this chapter (re-)constructs the moment of contact between Steven and Januari. Januari's story offers a valuable insight into the power relations at play, on the one hand revealing that such relationships were not always set in stone, whilst on the other showing that boys like Januari always found themselves on the losing side of the equation.

The history of the two boys reveals the profound disparity of information available in the historical record of those who travelled on board the ships of the VOC 250 years ago. The difficulty or ease with which we can identify historical figures is intimately connected to the colonial relations that existed at the time. The case of Steven and Januari illustrates why it is important to raise imaginative questions – in this case about love, sexuality, hierarchy, and abuse – even if the records do not provide us with clear-cut answers. Furthermore, it will show that present-day knowledge of criminal law practice, sexual development in children, and racial discourse can guide us in answering such questions. It is only through an imaginative and layered engagement with the past that we can construct a story that does justice to the historical experience of an enslaved boy like Januari.

2 ANRI (Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia), Residentiearchief Ambon, inventory number 963: 'Steven Harderwijk en Januari van Souratte, verdachten van sodomie aan boord van de *Amerongen*, 1769' ('Steven Hardewijk and Januari van Souratte, suspected of sodomy on board the *Amerongen*, 1769'). The original Dutch reads: 'Wat zij daar deden', and 'Dat zij daar maar wat speelden'.

On Board

Today, historical research can be done from the kitchen table. Thanks not least to the widespread digitisation of archives such as on the website of the Nationaal Archief, you can now dive straight into the world of the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC, United East India Company). The VOC archives also contain a number of extremely useful databases, amongst the most important of which are the Dutch Asiatic shipping database, which lists all VOC ships that sailed between the Dutch Republic and Asia; the VOC *opvarenden* ('persons on board') database, which lists all the people in the Dutch Republic who were employed by the VOC and who signed up for the return voyage; and the *Boekhouder-generaal Batavia* database (Batavia Accountant General's database), which records the cargoes transported by VOC ships, both within Asia, and between Asia and Europe. Using these resources, it is possible to follow the ships, persons, and goods that moved between the Dutch Republic and Asia. The database of seafarers also offers direct access to digitised personnel records (ships' pay registers), which provide details on the birthplace, debts, marital state, and careers of the men employed by the VOC.³

The databases are a veritable gold mine for anyone interested in the life stories and living environments of those who undertook the journey to Asia. As an example, let me pick out one of them: Steven Harderwijk from Amersfoort. He turns up in the database of *opvarenden*, because in 1767, as a cabin boy, he signed on in Amsterdam to sail on the return ship *Bovenkerker Polder*, which was built in 1765. It was the first trip for Steven, who was thirteen years old at the time. He left with a debt of twenty-five guilders to one Jan Govers, probably the *zielverkoper* ('soul seller') or intermediary recruiter who had advanced him the money for his accommodation and equipment. During this voyage, *Bovenkerker Polder* had 280 men on board, of whom sixty died – about one in five. Steven survived the journey, but on arrival in Batavia on 15 July 1767, he spent more than a month in hospital. Eighteen months later, he embarked on the ship *Amerongen*, which sailed

3 The databases mentioned above and the information about ships, cargo, and about passengers can be found on the websites of the Huygens ING and the Dutch National Archives: Boekhouder-generaal Batavia: <https://bgb.huygens.knaw.nl>; Dutch Asiatic Shipping: <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/das>. This database was originally published as a book and can also be consulted as an e-book: <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/retroboeken/das>. The ship's paybooks (Scheepssoldijboeken) were the source for the passenger database, 'VOC: Opvarenden' from the National Archives: <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/voc-opvarenden>.

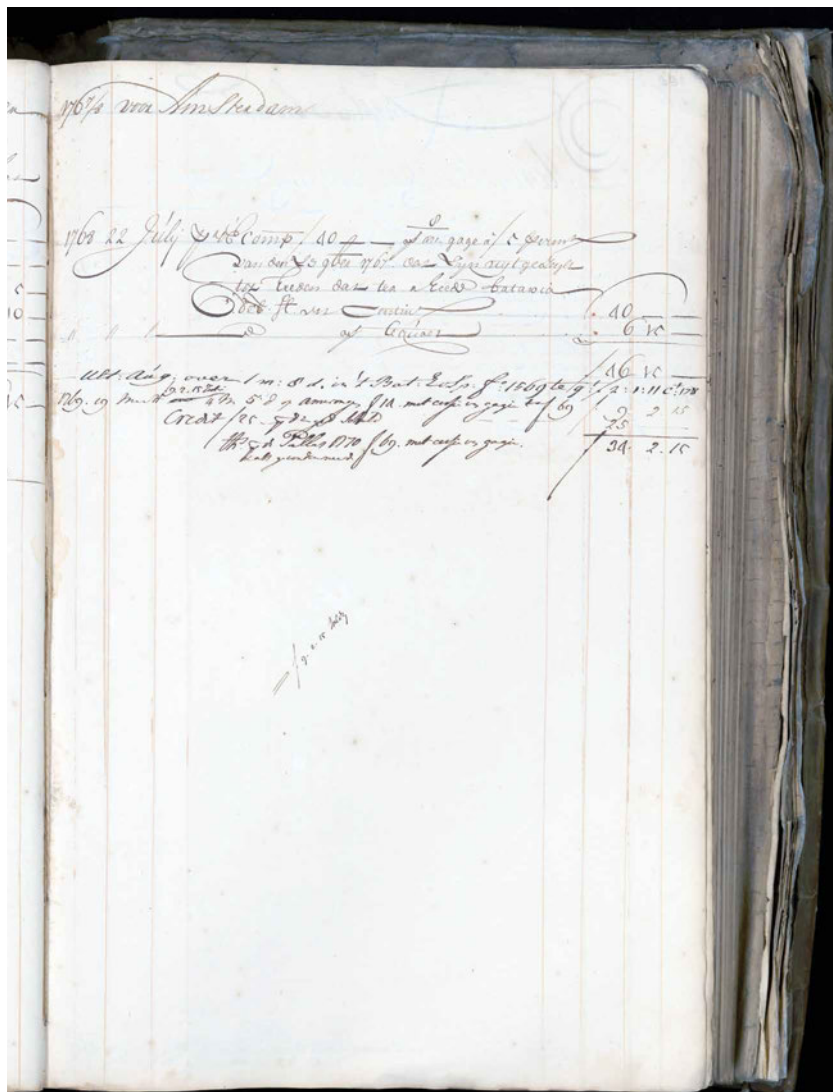


Figure 7.1 Fragment from Steven's payroll, registering his return without payment and 'als gecondemneerd' (last words on the page). NA 1.04.02, 6502, Scheepssoldijboek Bovenkerker Polder.

to Ambon. Finally, in 1770, he returned to the Republic on the *Pallas*. Upon his return his debt was paid off, but the word *gecondemneerd* (convicted) is scribbled into his personnel record (fig. 7.1). The file does not state what he was convicted of.⁴

4 For the data about Steven, see: VOC: Opvarenden van het Nationaal Archief: <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/voc-opvarenden>. The data are linked to the scans of the original archive.

The hospital where Steven ended up in Batavia was an extremely unhealthy place, and many of the sailors died there. Typhoid fever was one of the main causes of death. The average death rate of sailors was between eleven and fifteen percent, and hence the situation on the *Bovenkerker Polder*, where the mortality rate was at least twenty per cent, was above average. Notwithstanding the conditions on the *Bovenkerker Polder*, it could be a lot worse. Take, for example, the *Amerongen*, on which Steven later served. The records show that, on its fifth voyage between Amsterdam and Batavia in 1764, the ship had a total of 219 sailors on board, of whom sixty-nine died on the way – almost a third. This voyage was the *Amerongen's* last from the Republic. The ship did not return to Europe, but sailed another five years on the intra-Asian trading voyages, first between Batavia and Surat (North-West India), and later mainly between port cities on Java. The last long route was between Batavia and Ambon in 1769. Steven also sailed on that journey. A year later, the ship was decommissioned.⁵

The above information on the routes sailed by the *Amerongen* is taken from the *Boekhouder-generaal Batavia* database. Fortunately, this database allows one to dive into the hold and see what the ships were carrying. For example, during the years that the *Amerongen* moved between Batavia and Surat, it transported various types of textiles from Surat, from handkerchiefs to colourfully dyed silk chintz and everyday blue-and-white-striped cotton cloths. It also carried 5,000 kg of *putjuk* – a gum from the *Costus indicus* popular in China for the production of incense, but also used medicinally. The commercial value of the *putjuk* shipment was more than 15,000 guilders.⁶ All these products were destined for the Asian market. In the Netherlands, we sometimes forget that the world of the VOC revolved around so much more than just the pepper and cloves for which the company was established in the first place. Sometimes, if you scroll through these cargo lists, you will come across people described as, for example: '10 *pees* [pieces] slave, male Papuan, large and small' in a crossing from Ternate to Batavia (Schrikker and Wickramasinghe 2020). So, slaves were also listed as if they were goods. People to be used either as gifts and/or commodities are often found on board the ships of the VOC. Yet Januari van Souratte, who also sailed on the *Amerongen* as an enslaved boy, is nowhere to be found in those databases.

5 For these data about routes and cargo within Asia, see: Boekhouder-generaal Batavia: <https://bgb.huygens.knaw.nl>; and for the return journeys: Dutch Asiatic Shipping: <http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/das>.

6 Boekhouder-generaal Batavia: <https://bgb.huygens.knaw.nl>.

Trade and Shipping in Asia

Whilst the databases present a fantastic resource, they do not tell us everything. Why was Steven punished? Who was Januari? To know what happened on board the *Amerongen*, we have to dive deeper into the web of the VOC archives, in this case a court file from Ambon, which is kept in the archives in Jakarta. Steven misbehaved so badly on board the *Amerongen* in the eyes of his colleagues that they reported him to the Ambon Court of Justice. Januari van Souratte also appears to have been involved in the incident.⁷

Presumably, Januari had come aboard the *Amerongen* in 1766 after the vessel had entered the port of Surat.⁸ Januari must have been about eight years old when he was bought in Surat by the boatman. We do not know much about his origins. Slave trade networks from the Middle East, India, and East Africa came together in Surat. The people traded there came mainly, but not exclusively, from East Africa. An important party in this centuries-old trade along the West Indian coast were the Sidis. These slave-soldiers, originally from Africa, claimed their own power base by building fortifications along the coast. Later, in the seventeenth century, it was mainly the Gujarati and Arab traders who dominated the trade in humans in this corner of the Indian Ocean (Barendse 2002; Basa 2001; Machado 2014; Nadri 2015). From the beginning of its presence in Surat, the VOC was able to adapt to this situation. For example, it brought human cargo to Mocha when the opportunity arose. Sergeant Jürgen Anders wrote of one such transaction in April 1646 after a voyage from Surat to Mocha: ‘after our arrival in Mocha we brought our 120 slaves ashore to sell as cattle to the Muslims’ (Roeper and van Gelder 2002, 172).⁹

In the trade in humans, children were sought after from about seven years of age. They were then physically strong enough to survive childhood diseases and young enough to mould them into ideal workers and teach them new languages and customs. Surat ‘soul sellers’ (*serangs*) had the habit of buying young boys in order to, for example, hire them out later as sailors to Gujarati or European skippers (Nadri 2015, 136–64). Since Januari is explicitly described several times in the documents as a ‘black slave boy,’

7 All information about the court in Ambon and the events that took place on board is based on the same court record: ANRI, Residentiearchief Ambon, inventory number 963: ‘Steven Harderwijk en Januari van Souratte, verdachten van sodomie aan boord van de *Amerongen*, 1769.’

8 Reconstruction based on Boekhouder-generaal Batavia: <https://bgb.huygens.knaw.nl>.

9 ‘[...] na onze komst in Mokka hebben wij onze 120 slaven aan land gebracht om als vee aan de moslims te verkopen.’

he may have originated in East Africa and been brought to Surat by Gujarati traders. We can be more certain that the boatswain of the *Amerongen* must have bought him on the slave market in Surat when the ship was anchored there in January 1766. That was probably also the moment that he was given the name 'Januari' – his birth name remains unknown. The boy is invariably referred to as 'Januari of Souratte' in the records (Carter and Wickramasinghe 2018). Just as for the Gujarati traders, buying a young child was an investment for a VOC officer, as he could be moulded and prepared for a life in a household or as a sailor (van Rossum 2015, 29–57).

For more than three years, the *Amerongen* served as Januari's home. However, he would not have been the only non-European on board. It was common in the eighteenth century for the VOC to employ Asian sailors on the Asian trade routes. These Moorish sailors, as they were called, were supplied by Suratse *serangs* – just as the Amsterdam-based *zielverkopers* had done for Steven. For the *Amerongen*, we can be certain that there was someone else from Surat on board, a sailor called Miessing, and in all probability there were more. The historian Matthias van Rossum (2014), in his study of the living conditions of European and Asian sailors on board, clearly shows that these men were dependent on each other, worked together, and partly lived alongside each other. For example, there was a separate cooking and eating area for the Moorish sailors – known as the Moorish galley – and the rations for the Moorish sailors were different from those for the Europeans (van Rossum 2014).

Children of the Company

When the *Amerongen* left Batavia in 1769 for Ambon, at least Januari, Steven, and Miessing were on board. The ship's cargo was diverse: from hats and handkerchiefs to writing implements and building materials picked up on Java's north-east coast along the way. At that time Januari was still only a boy of eleven, maybe twelve years of age. In the three years since his departure from Surat, he had at least learned to speak Dutch, but it is not clear exactly what kind of work he had to do for his owner. We do know that he could move about somewhat freely on board and that he met Steven Harderwijk several times near the Moorish galley.

Steven Harderwijk had left Amsterdam two years earlier with the *Bovenkerker Polder*. He had come aboard the *Amerongen* in March, when he was almost fifteen years old. We know a little more about Steven than we do about Januari. He was born in April 1754 in Amersfoort, his father and

mother were called Anthonij and Hendrika, and he had an elder brother and two sisters. The family were members of the Dutch Reformed Church. Shortly after his youngest sister was born, he signed on with the VOC in Amsterdam. An uncle had also enlisted in 1760, but died in 1762.¹⁰ Hence, the family were no strangers to the VOC. It was not unusual for Steven to have enlisted at such a young age: on the *Bovenkerker Polder*, he was in the company of eight other ship's boys. There were also eighteen *hooplopers* on board – young sailors, who on average must have been slightly older than the ship's boys. It has been estimated that in the seventeenth century, some twelve and a half percent of seamen were in fact children, whilst the eighteenth-century database shows that the proportion of children on board was slightly higher at around fourteen per cent. An average crew of 250 would therefore have comprised approximately thirty-five children (Ketting 2002). These boys spent their adolescence on board VOC ships surrounded by grown-up men. Life on board was harsh, not only because illness and death were always near, but also because there was a lot of brawling and bullying. You can imagine that the children were drawn to each other under these circumstances, but of course this might not always have been the case, nor should we assume that contact between children was always positive (Ketting 2002).¹¹

We do not know why Steven enlisted – was his family poor and did he therefore have no choice? We do know that orphanages sometimes enlisted their children as punishment for bad behaviour, and sometimes simply because the orphanages were too full.¹² Two of the children who signed up for the *Bovenkerker Polder* together with Steven, Cornelis Willemse Knip and

10 The data about Steven's family background were found through the website *wiewaswie.nl*, in which digitised archives from a range of Dutch municipal archives have been integrated and which are searchable at the level of personal names.

11 Not much is known about the age demographics of VOC personnel, except for the estimate Ketting made for the seventeenth century. The percentages I mention are based on a rough estimate based on the VOC database *Opvarenden*. Because the year of birth or age was not recorded in the personnel records, it is difficult to give an exact figure. Instead, I looked at two types of jobs, those of ship's boys and *hooplopers*, who were usually aged twelve to seventeen. They made up about fourteen per cent of the total population, although this estimate is only an approximation. There are other categories of young workers, such as young sailors and young soldiers, but they are more likely to have been around eighteen to twenty years old. More research is needed for a more accurate estimate. It is also interesting to ask whether in the course of the eighteenth century the VOC started to hire increasingly younger boys due to a lack of personnel.

12 For orphans who were enrolled in the VOC, sometimes as punishment, see Geuzebroek (2020, 114). The municipal archives of Leiden have a number of letters from orphaned boys who were enrolled in the VOC or WIC as punishment. They write about their experiences in very different ways. The letters were published in Van Wieren-Maan (2018). On child labour in the

Jan Pieterse de Haan, came from an orphanage in Uitgeest. Also, a shortage of personnel meant that the VOC took on anyone who came forward. In the second half of the eighteenth century, administrators complained bitterly about the quality of the personnel. Perhaps Steven was simply better off on board than at home, or perhaps his parents had sent him away because he was rebellious. Whatever the reason, in one way at least Steven could be considered lucky: two of the nine ship's boys died within a year. Some of the boys returned soon, like Steven, but three others remained in service for years. One of them, Hendrik Frank, even survived the VOC and stayed in Asia after 1799.¹³

Januari certainly had no choice; his fate lay solely in the hands of the adults who sold and owned him. Furthermore, although he does not figure in the percentage of children on board, there were undoubtedly more boys like him, as it was quite common for officers and officials to take enslaved boys with them. These boys served them on the voyage and could later be sold elsewhere for profit. We can therefore assume that there were always children like Januari on board whenever a ship sailed within Asia, even though we do not always see them in the archives (van Rossum 2014). For historians, children like Januari are like ghosts: because they do not appear in the official records, it seems as if they did not exist. Indeed, children like Januari only become visible when something extraordinary happened.

Steven and Januari's Game

We know for sure that Steven and Januari encountered each other along the way, because their meetings eventually led to a conviction by the criminal court in Ambon, records of which appear in the archives in Jakarta. Trials like these are a fascinating source for historians because they reveal so much about what people thought and did. So, what happened? Whilst the ship was at anchor in the harbour of Ambon, the two boys were caught lying, semi-naked, on top of each other. When the cableman, Jan Stelling caught them, Januari jumped up in fright and, lifting up his trousers, said that they were only playing. Startled, he also said that he had only bent down to pick up his handkerchief. It turned out, however, that during the crossing there had been other times when the two boys were seen in each

Dutch Republic in general and on the employment of orphaned boys with the VOC specifically, see van Nederveen Meerkerk and Schmidt (2008).

13 *Scheepssoldijboek Bovenkerker Polder*: NA 1.04.02, 6502.

punishable by death. The fact that homosexual acts were forbidden did not mean that they did not occur. In practice, people turned a blind eye to sex between men, although, particularly in the 1730s, there was a sharp rise in the persecution of homosexuality and many sodomy trials took place in the Dutch Republic. We do not know exactly how many such trials took place within the VOC, but we know from the work of van Rossum and Ketting that they were held with some regularity (Ketting 2002; van Rossum 2014). There seems to have been an increase in the number of trials in the VOC, as at home in the Dutch Republic, in the eighteenth century.

During the trial, Januari explained that Steven had pursued him during the entire voyage and that they had ended up behind the galley in this way before. When they were caught, however, Januari was found on top because Steven had told him that it was his turn, saying: 'I'll teach you to screw.'¹⁵ There does not seem to have been any violence during the act. Yet the situation is not clear-cut. Was this primarily a matter of play and experiment, or a case of budding sexuality between two young adolescents? In the eyes of the eighteenth-century VOC official, the behaviour of the two boys was punishable regardless of age or consent. This is also clear from the very first sentence of the trial. The case does not begin with an explanation of the case and the testimonies, as would be considered usual, but rather with an introduction or *exordium*. The president of the law court in Ambon introduced the case by stating that sodomy was unnatural, not only for humans, but for 'all animals born in the sky, on earth and in the sea,'¹⁶ continuing: 'With how much more abhorrence and detestation should we not look down upon a sin that flouts the law of nature, despises it, thwarts the continuance of mankind. Yea, erases the name of Christ.'¹⁷ The president concluded with the observation that the 'Roman emperors Constantinus and Constans wanted and desired that such villains [...] should be punished with this sword'¹⁸ – in other words, the death penalty. The *exordium* sounds like a voice from a distant past, reminding us how law and faith were intertwined and how standards in the past can deviate from those of the present.

15 'ik zal je wel even leren naijen'. (The quotations in footnotes 15-19 are from ANRI, Residentiearchief Ambon, inventory number 963.)

16 'alle dieren die in de lugt, op aarde en in de zee geboren worden'.

17 'Met hoeveel te meerder afschuwing en verfoeing moeten wij dan niet nederzien op een zonde die de wetten der natuur in de wind slaat, deszelve veragt, de voortseeting van het mensdom dwarsboomt. Ja de naam van Christus uijtwist.'

18 'Roomse Keyzers Constantinus en Constans wilden en begeerden dat sulke booswichten [...] met de swaarde zouden gestraft worden.'

The exordium showed that the two boys had in fact already been judged as offenders before the trial started. However, the case was also about establishing exactly what had happened, since the Court of Justice had to determine whether the death penalty was justified in this case. Therefore, in addition to the boys themselves, the witnesses who brought the case to light were also interviewed. They were four Dutch sailors, two older and two younger, who were perhaps little older than Steven himself, and the Moor Miessing from Surat. Immediately after the boys had been arrested, Steven had said that Januari had taken the initiative and had kept chasing him. However, the council did not find this credible, in view of the statements of the witnesses and the testimony of Januari himself.

It gradually becomes clear that the court felt a certain compassion for Januari, who was repeatedly referred to as 'the little black slave boy.' The judges appreciated the fact that he had repented. It must have been an intimidating situation for the young Januari, there in the courtroom surrounded by high-ranking European men. The way Steven treated Januari must also have been intimidating. Remember that Steven was three years older – at their age this is a big difference. Furthermore, Steven was white. Steven and Januari's sexual escapades do not reflect affection or love. Rather, a picture emerges of experimenting boys, with Steven clearly dominating. This emerges from Januari's own testimony, but also from Steven's other behaviour as recounted by witnesses: Steven was cheeky and scolded his fellow sailors, and we would currently perhaps describe his behaviour as oversexed. The cableman Stelling and the young sailor Philippus had caught him twice before with a chicken between his legs. Philippus had therefore called him a 'chicken fucker',¹⁹ a comment which had been overheard by others.

Sexuality on board is an important subject, because it was part of everyday reality, but it is difficult to investigate unless in cases that went to court like this one. Matthias van Rossum (2014) gives a handful of examples of court cases in which men on board not only committed sexual acts on chickens, but also, for example, in mast holes. We simply do not know to what extent and with what regularity frustration during the long voyages led to such behaviour. Ketting (2002) suspects that acts of paedophilia were also common and he gives a number of examples of young boys who ran away screaming whilst older sailors tried to sexually violate them, usually resulting in a court case (see also van Meer 1995, 272–73). Tender or loving sex is never mentioned in these cases, which is not to say that it never

19 'hoenderneuker'.

happened. In the case of Steven and Januari, it is clear in any case that the colleagues on board the *Amerongen* disapproved of Steven's behaviour and reported it, and as such they must have known that severe punishment awaited them.²⁰ Would they have considered that the report could also have far-reaching consequences for the enslaved Januari? At the same time, one can also wonder how reliable they were as witnesses, if indeed their intention was to be rid of Steven. The court, however, did not consider this possibility and hence took the testimonies completely seriously.

The trial that opened so unequivocally gradually took an interesting turn. After it had been established that Steven in particular was the culprit in this case, the court decided to have him examined by a doctor. The doctor concluded that Steven was still barely sexually mature: he suspected that he was not yet capable of full ejaculation, because his '*partes genitales* were not fully grown, nor had his *pupes* in any way become visible.'²¹ In short, his genitals were not yet fully grown and he hardly had any pubic hair. In modern medical terms: Steven was at Tanner stage 2, or perhaps just at stage 3, in terms of the development of his sexual organs.²²

A Contemporary View

How should a historian interpret the case today? Could not the relationship between Steven and Januari have been burgeoning love and the sexual acts the accompanying innocent play and experimentation? Steven's actions with the chicken, however, seem to point in a different direction. In my attempt to fully grasp the significance of this case, I will allow myself an ahistorical thought experiment: how would professionals look at this case today?²³

20 Ketting (2002) suspects that this might have been the case in several of the seventeenth-century sodomy cases he studied. Van Rossum (2014) and Ketting (2002) both pay extensive attention to the sodomy cases and both emphasise that everyone knew that the death penalty would be the likely outcome of a trial. Their work does not mention cases involving sex between children or teenagers.

21 Zijn '*partes genitales* nog geensinds gezet, nog de *pupes* sig op eenige hande manieren quam te vertoonen.'

22 The Tanner scale is broadly used in the field of medicine to describe the stage of development of sexual organs during adolescence.

23 This section is based on conversations with three professionals who deal often with questions concerning juvenile law, sexuality, and vice cases, and with whom I discussed the historical case of Steven and Januari: Sophie Broersen (journalist at Medisch Contact and a medical doctor at GGD Hollands Midden); Reinier Feiner (a criminal and juvenile law specialist at FeinerIwema Advocaten and the chair of the Vereniging Sociale Advocatuur Nederland); and Carin Strop

Sexual relations between boys in themselves would be a non-issue in the Netherlands today and would of course not be considered an offence. However, the sexual behaviour of a child such as Steven could be labelled as transgressive by doctors, and that would immediately be seen as a red flag: what did this child experience in his young life? Research shows that this type of behaviour is more common amongst mentally impaired children at a young age and that such children are also more likely to have been abused themselves. Sadly, the eighteenth-century judges concerned with the case did not waste words on such issues. Therefore, we do not know whether Steven had a history of abuse, but it helps us now to think about this case further. I have already suggested that acts of paedophilia on board was probably common enough; so had Steven himself been abused on his earlier voyages?

And how do we place Januari's experience? His testimony and that of the others does not indicate that it was violent. Was it, then, perhaps playful or experimental behaviour on his part? Playing is also the word that young Januari himself used when they were caught. However, it also becomes clear that he did not like it very much. He literally said that Steven had pushed him all the time during the journey to sleep together and had made him do these things. He also said that he regretted it. A recent Dutch guideline for social workers on adolescent sexuality emphasises that when boys and girls perform sexual acts with older children or adults before the age of fourteen, this almost always occurs under (social) coercion (de Graaf et al. 2017). Is there reason to believe that this was any different in the early modern period – specifically in the case of Januari? It is often said that we should not measure such matters against the standards of the present, but in my opinion, this actually helps us to draw past events into clearer focus. Knowledge from the present can help us to understand the colonial world. It is important to allow ourselves to raise imaginative questions about the people of the past, their desires and whims, and think through the possible answers, even if we will never know for certain. This is essential if we want to reach beyond what the archives can tell us.

From the perspective of contemporary juvenile law, other things come to the fore if we continue this ahistorical thought experiment and imagine that we present the case of Januari and Steven to the court as a contemporary sexual abuse case. We assume that the judge in this hypothetical case would consider the testimonies of bystanders and Januari to be reliable, as

(judge at Rechtbank Den Haag). They helped me shape a present-day perspective of the case, although the interpretation is entirely my own.

the Ambon court did at the time. Of course, such a case today would not be about sodomy, but rather about the power relationship between the two children. A judge would then ask whether there had been coercion. Aspects that might influence the power relationship between the two would be considered, such as age, mental development, and their status amongst their peers. Januari was clearly the victim in the case, primarily because he was younger and smaller than Steven, but there was another, specifically historical aspect to the relationship that allowed Steven to exercise power over Januari, who was a slave and therefore socially subordinate to Steven. Thus, a contemporary court would only punish Steven, because he would be seen as the perpetrator.

Januari was a victim, but even if he were not, he would not be punished because he was under twelve. If the case proved that Steven had indeed forced Januari to engage in sexual acts against his will, the judge would request a personality test, observing Steven's behaviour. He or she would then set an appropriate punishment that would focus on treatment to prevent repetition. Today, therefore, Steven would not be tried. If it did come to trial, Steven's lawyer would mainly try to prove his client's innocence, for example by denying Steven's position of power and stating that, whilst there may have been a biological difference of three years between the two boys, no such mental difference existed. The lawyer might also paint a gloomy picture of life on board among adults who created a very unsafe environment for the boys, and who would have had a bad influence on their morale. The question whether Steven may have been abused himself is less relevant to establishing guilt, but would be important to the judge in determining the punishment. Punishment for minors is what they now call educational punishment, consisting of psychiatric care and, possibly, juvenile detention.

Eighteenth-century criminal law practice did not focus on treatment or care, although preventing repetition remained an important goal. We can only imagine how anxious Januari must have felt when he heard the judge's thundering exordium in the courtroom. When Steven dared him and touched him, and ordered him to try it too, Januari probably did not even know that such acts were punishable by death in Christian Europe. In eighteenth-century legal practice, the situation on board was not taken into account in any way, and the interests of the children were considered irrelevant; of course, such children lacked legal representation in court. The only thing the judges in Ambon seemed to take into account was the age difference and the character of Steven, and this provides an unexpected parallel between past and present (*cf.* van Egmond 1995, 81–84).

Steven and Januari's Fate

Januari instinctively has my sympathy, as indeed he seems to have had the sympathy of the judges in Ambon who handled the case. They seem to have had compassion for him. Januari was seen as a human being in the courtroom in Ambon, at least for a moment. It is clear that the judges saw two children standing before them and, ultimately, they also had some consideration for their ages. The account of the facts and testimonies is followed by pages of quotations from the Bible (how serious the offence is and why it should be punished) and from Roman Catholic legal scholars (to reinforce these points and especially with regard to the question of whether children may receive the death penalty).

The court finally decided to send the two boys to Batavia, with the advice that Steven 'should be banished for ever to as far away as possible'.²⁴ What place they had in mind is not clear. They initially wanted to send Januari to Banda for 'a few years,' but this was later crossed out and increased to ten years. Interestingly, the court's compassion went out to Januari, despite his status as a slave. Apparently, colour and status mattered a little less in this particular case.

However, this is only a snapshot. When the boys arrived in Batavia, Steven somehow managed to curry favour with the governor general. As a result, Steven's punishment ended up being remarkably light. The governor general decided that Steven should return to the Netherlands.²⁵ He was put on board the *Pallas*, admittedly as a person 'condemned,' but in the Netherlands he could disembark as a free man. As a result, his 'exile' entailed little hardship. Perhaps someone put in a good word for him, or maybe the governor general, knowing the situation on board the ships, turned a blind eye to this type of offence? Steven got off well, because corporal punishment was common in addition to banishment in other sodomy cases between children. We also know examples from Amsterdam of boys who ended up being condemned to strangulation for sodomy.²⁶ After his return to the Republic, Steven could go wherever he wanted as if nothing had happened.

24 'voor altijd naar zo ver weg mogelijk verbannen diende te worden,' and 'eenige jaren'. ANRI, Residentiearchief Ambon, inventory number 963.

25 See: *realia* (index) on the resolutions of the governor general and his council for the month of July 1769 at: <https://sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id/generalresolutions/>.

26 For similar cases I refer to Muhammad Asyraf's exceptionally rich Master's thesis, 'A Distant Mirror: Violent Public Punishment in the VOC Batavia, 1729–1739,' which can be consulted via the online thesis repository of Leiden University at www.studenttheses.universiteitleiden.nl. Asyraf (Rafi) shows that fifteen men were convicted of sodomy between 1729 and 1739. All cases of sodomy that came before the Court of Justice in Batavia in these years took place on board a

And Januari? In Ambon, the councillors had, at least to some extent, seen him as a human being. They seemed to feel sorry for him, perhaps due to the intercession of the other sailors. However, his owner – the boatman – immediately dropped him and distanced himself from him as if he were contagious. Once ashore in Batavia, he was a slave boy like many others and the governor general carried out his punishment without mercy: ten years of banishment to Banda, 10,000 kilometres from the coast of Africa where he was born.

I have not been able to ascertain Januari's ultimate fate. The chances are that he did not survive those ten years of forced labour. If he did, the VOC probably sold him on to a *perkenier*, a planter, for whom he would have worked as a slave on the nutmeg plantations for the rest of his life. Yet maybe, as happened regularly, he was able to flee.

Conclusion: Januari's Ghost

Databases concerning the VOC are a valuable tool. They work almost like time machines, bringing the long-forgotten people, goods, ships, and shipping routes of the VOC into clear focus. At the same time, they reflect only a fraction of that historical reality. It is a paradox that, precisely because of the enormous wealth of information and detail in the databases, historians run the risk of missing which lurks in the shadows on board ships. They fail to cast light on the lives of those who did not end up in the registers, but for whom life on board could be extremely difficult. Court records can help to bring to life the people who otherwise remain unseen, whose histories remain untold – even if the legal case that produced these records will more often than not have been unfortunate, as was the case with Januari. The story of Steven and Januari is therefore not merely about whether their sexual encounter was play, love, or coercion. It portrays social relations in a colonial world and a contemporary view helps to see those historical

ship. The background of the defendants was diverse: they were about equally Dutch and Asian. Nine of the fifteen men were sentenced to death by drowning. In two cases, fourteen-year-old boys were involved. They did not receive the death penalty, but severe corporal punishment that was carried out in public (Asyraf 2020). This underlines the conclusion that Steven was very lucky. This is also true in comparison with criminal cases from Amsterdam in the same period: the data on the death penalty for boys from the orphanage in Amsterdam come from Geuzebroek (2020, 118–19). She also gives an example of a case against a fourteen-year-old boy who abused an eleven-year-old boy, a situation similar to that of Steven and Januari. Here, the fourteen-year-old boy received fifty years of solitary confinement as punishment (Geuzebroek 2020).

relations more clearly. Sometimes, as this case show, you can only place a historical experience in the right context by analysing it with present-day knowledge.

Januari was briefly seen by the councillors in the courtroom in Ambon, but otherwise he remains a shadow. The people who brought the case did not think about what would happen to him; they were targeting Steven instead. To the governor general in Batavia, Januari was nothing more than an anonymous, Black child slave. He felt no compassion for a boy like Januari, but he did for the white child Steven, who was given a second chance. Januari's ghost forces us to think about colonial relations, norms, and values. Once you have seen him, he will continue to haunt you. And rightly so.

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