



# Merchants as Diplomats

## Embassies as an Illustration of European-Asian Relations

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On their arrival in June 1596 before the city of Banten on Java, the commanders of the first Dutch fleet assumed new titles. The junior-merchants named themselves “Captain,” while their admiral, Cornelis de Houtman, adopted the title of “Captain-Major.”<sup>1</sup> This latter title in particular gives the impression that the motive for this change of nomenclature was to emulate the Portuguese, whose leaders used the title *capitão-mor*: after all, in preparing the expedition De Houtman had spent considerable time in Lisbon. Before the

Dutch ventured ashore, they held several talks with the city’s authorities, as well as with any Portuguese who happened to be in the area, all of whom visited them aboard. When De Houtman finally went ashore for a first visit to the city’s governor, he was accompanied by eight midshipmen who were dressed in satin and velvet with rapiers at their side, a parasol carrier, and a trumpeter who made himself heard regularly. Twelve boatswains completed the party. The aim of this retinue was undoubtedly to impress, for De Houtman’s mission was political as well as commercial. His goal was not merely to buy pepper, he also had to try to make a treaty in which Banten and the Dutch declared themselves allies. Even though the Dutch emphasized their intention to trade, their behaviour as well as their proposal of an alliance made it clear that they were no

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mere merchants. Like a true veteran diplomat, the Dutch Captain-Major handed over his credentials, the patents of the States-General, and the letter in which Prince Maurits of Orange had awarded his commission.<sup>2</sup> Nor did the Bantenese authorities, judging from their behaviour, regard the Dutch solely as tradesmen. Shortly after De Houtman arrived, he and his party were asked to make their ships available for a military expedition against the sovereign of Palembang on Sumatra. This brief account of the first Dutch voyage to Southeast Asia shows that for both parties, the Bantenese and the Dutch, trade and politics were closely interlinked, and that a merchant could not hold his own without an awareness of local political relations. In most Indonesian harbour cities, the first official one would encounter was the *syahbandar* or harbourmaster. This title, derived from the Persian, again indicates the existence of a system of international relations in Southeast Asia.<sup>3</sup>

The Dutch visit to the Indonesian Archipelago draws attention to a subject that has hitherto been little studied: the diplomatic relations established between European and Asian rulers in the early modern era.<sup>4</sup> The question arises as to whether the Dutch were assigned a position in this system of diplomatic relations within Asia, and, if so, exactly what was that place? Did it differ from the position held back home? Did the Dutch adapt to foreign customs when they interacted with different cultures, or was their behaviour a mixture of various traditions? It is even possible that both parties failed to understand each other. Taking into account that the basis for the present-day diplomatic system was formed in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we will compare this early Western system with the system of diplomatic relations in Asia.<sup>5</sup>

Important factors in the early European system of diplomatic relations were the hierarchy of states, the mutual acknowledgement of sovereignty, the exchange of delegations, and a system of permanent embassies.<sup>6</sup> Previously, diplomatic contacts had been temporary: embassies were sent out in order to settle disputes or attend festivities, and returned to their country of origin immediately afterwards. Permanent embassies, however, remained in the country where they had been accredited. To enable such permanent contact, diplomats and their staff were granted immunity. This system came about gradually. The European religious

wars in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries had brought an end to the unity and order of the Christian world. It was not until after the peace of Westphalia in 1648 that a new order emerged in which the various sovereign states occupied places of their own. The form of sovereignty that thus came into existence entailed the exchange of diplomatic delegations on a reciprocal basis. However, taking into account the substantial differences in force, power and size between the European states, reciprocity did not automatically lead to equality: these differences were expressed in a hierarchy that was strictly observed whenever rulers or ambassadors met, and disputes over superiority in rank could even lead to armed conflicts. There was, for instance, the incident of the traffic accident between the carriages bearing the ambassadors of France and Spain in Rome. The French diplomat regarded himself as a representative of “the most Christian ruler in the world,” whereas the Spaniard clearly represented himself as “the most Catholic regime that ever existed.” Each one utterly convinced of his own superiority, both refused to yield the right of way, with the result that they collided. The battle that followed led to many casualties, with deaths on both sides.

Despite such ceremonial inequalities, which resulted in continual squabbling over hard-won diplomatic positions, the European states laid the foundations for a system which, although initially confined to Western Europe, would eventually become universal. At first, foreign rulers were excluded: the Russians were considered too remote, and non-Christians were boycotted for religious reasons.<sup>7</sup> An exception was made for exchanges with representatives of Muslim monarchs.<sup>8</sup> The system of European states was not a closed system; every now and then newcomers were admitted into the ranks. On the whole, however, the participants in this system were limited to the courts of Christian denominations. The relationship with non-Christian peoples was not solely governed by factors of religion or distance. According to international law, which originated at the same time, a universal law applied to all peoples equally. One of the supporters of this view, which derived from theories of natural law, was the Dutch jurist Hugo de Groot (Hugo Grotius),<sup>9</sup> whose ideas were in many ways a continuation of the efforts of those Spanish jurists who had occupied themselves with the law of conquest and colonisation after America had been discovered in the sixteenth

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century.<sup>10</sup> De Groot showed himself an outspoken supporter of the principle of equality, an important notion in the law of nature, according to which the laws that applied in Europe were valid the world over. Particularly on the subject of contracts and agreements, De Groot assumed that Asian, Dutch and other European sovereigns were all bound by the notion *pacta servanda sunt*. Although De Groot's ideas were introduced after the first Dutch expeditions had begun, they corresponded to the views of the first merchants who sailed to Asia.<sup>11</sup> *Bona fides* should form the foundation of all trade, although this was more a statement of principle than an account of universal practice. Even De Groot was forced to stretch his views to maintain Dutch claims, when he worked as a lawyer for the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and had to negotiate free passage into the Moluccas with the British.<sup>12</sup> This does not, however, alter the fact that the legal (sometimes legalistic) arguments inherent in the law of nature influenced the Dutch in their relations with Asians. At the same time, the first Dutch were very well aware of the major differences in hierarchy and status that existed between different peoples and countries. Moreover, the image they held of the Asian world was an ambivalent one, in which admiration was mixed with aversion to strange customs and practices.<sup>13</sup>

## THE FIRST EXPEDITIONS TO ASIA AND AFRICA

On later Dutch expeditions, contacts with local authorities took place along the lines of De Houtman's first visit. For instance, when a delegation from Zeeland visited Banten in 1599, the Dutch source merely mentions casually that "they sailed ashore to speak to the king."<sup>14</sup> The further course of events remains unknown. It is unlikely that they did actually visit the Sultan since he was only a minor at the time. The author of the report, however, was not in a very expansive mood. He finds worth mentioning the fact that two men, the captain and another crewmember, were stabbed to death by a Javanese, but, he demurs, "to describe more events would take too long."<sup>15</sup> What strikes us about the first quotation is the matter-of-factness with which the visit to the Sultan is mentioned. Equally remarkable is the ease with which these merchants were apparently granted an audience at the royal court. Nor was the experience of Cornelis de

Houtman different during his second expedition to Asia. On the islands of the Comoros, he and his company received a grand welcome from the "king." Even more splendid was the reception that greeted him and his crewmembers in Aceh.<sup>16</sup> After initial negotiations the Sultan received De Houtman with much ceremony and presented him with garments and a *keris*, while on subsequent visits to the royal court he was escorted to the palace with a parade of elephants. The Dutch were not the first Europeans to be granted such receptions, however, for many Portuguese embassies had preceded them.<sup>17</sup> According to the *Hikajat Atjéh*, it was not only the Europeans who sent out envoys: neighbouring Malayan sovereigns did so as well.<sup>18</sup>

But despite the full honours with which the Sultan of Aceh had first welcomed De Houtman, in 1599 matters ended badly for him. A Portuguese envoy from Malacca successfully managed to set the king against the newcomers. Intoxicated by *Datura* seeds, which the Acehnese had mixed into their farewell dinner, the Dutch were easy victims and were taken prisoner. Cornelis de Houtman himself was killed. Could it be that he was not the capable courtier and negotiator that the Dutch sources portrayed? The instructions given to him by his principals speak of peaceful trade: De Houtman was to avoid any trickery or deceit on the part of the Spanish, Portuguese or locals, and was to treat the natives with respect. Even if he had to use force in order to persuade people to trade with him, he would have to pay them fairly and squarely and hand over part of the profit.<sup>19</sup> He was not to cause inconvenience to anyone and was to avoid bloodshed at all cost. On both his first and second expeditions, it was De Houtman's task to obtain preferential terms in Asian towns of commerce by means of contracts. A further aim was to seek permission to build a lodge. Indeed, De Houtman managed to forge an agreement with the Sultan of Aceh in 1599, but it was the admiral's misfortune to place too much faith in these royal promises: "we believed we had made a deal with the king, as one would think when it is sealed under oath."<sup>20</sup> Despite his earlier experiences in Banten, De Houtman probably underestimated the rapid pace of the changes in political persuasion that could occur throughout the Malay world. Once again, he was no match for the Portuguese, who had had a whole century in which to explore the Malay world and had adapted to the

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prevailing customs.<sup>21</sup> Indirectly, De Houtman had fallen victim to the political changes prompted by his first appearance in Asia a few years earlier. To expel the Dutch, the Portuguese had sent a considerable fleet to the Sunda Straits. Although the ships arrived too late, they had left a deep impression on *os reis vezinhos*, the sovereigns around the Straits of Malacca. Several of them sent embassies to Malacca, and in 1599 the Sultan of Aceh offered the Portuguese the right to build a fort in his domain.<sup>22</sup> All this must have taken place as De Houtman and his party were in the area. Dutch sources do mention that a Portuguese envoy from Malacca was in Aceh at the time. A few years later, when relations in Aceh had changed in favour of the Dutch, the Acehnese Sultan even sent an embassy to the Low Countries.<sup>23</sup> To send delegations on such remote missions was not unusual: as early as 1562 an Acehnese embassy had already visited Constantinople.<sup>24</sup>

Judging by the instructions given to Dutch skippers, as well as by their behaviour, the envoys were not unprepared for the political risks involved in such distant expeditions. Once they had arrived on unknown coasts, they were very much on their guard. Often hostages were exchanged before the envoys set foot ashore.<sup>25</sup> This was part of an established custom that the Portuguese had already employed when they first visited Africa and Asia.<sup>26</sup>

And yet the Dutch proved themselves considerably adept at dealing with foreign sovereigns. In this respect, Pieter van den Broecke, a merchant from the southern Netherlands (now Belgium) was a remarkable person, maintaining relations with native

rulers in West Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, India and the Indonesian Archipelago. Apparently these visits took place much to the satisfaction of all parties. In any case, the king of Loanga in West Africa urged Van den Broecke to visit him more often.<sup>27</sup> Everything seems to indicate that this Dutchman felt very much at ease in the African kingdoms, even though he sometimes witnessed less than pleasant events. Van den Broecke

describes in a very matter of fact fashion how the Africans had clubbed a Portuguese to death with elephant's teeth because he had fired shots at the Dutch, "thus showing that the natives were dedicated to our country."<sup>28</sup> There are many other such reports that give an idea of the rough character of these early expeditions. Raiding a Portuguese ship or stopping native vessels were events that deserved only a casual mention. Like many of his contemporaries, Van den Broecke had a keen eye for rituals and ceremonies. He was quick to address the men of the king of Loanga who came to meet him as noblemen. As De Houtman had done in Banten, Van den Broecke arranged for a small retinue, including a trumpeter, to escort him on his visit to Sana, in

what is now Yemen. There was a considerable stir when the trumpeter began to play the "Wilhelmus," the Dutch national anthem, from atop the city walls. At the urgent request of a Turk who had visited the Netherlands and knew that the "Wilhelmus" had been used as the Dutch battle cry in the war against Spain, Van den Broecke silenced him.<sup>29</sup> At Sana, the Dutch were welcomed in great style by the *Beglerbegi*, who had sent out 300 horsemen to meet him.<sup>30</sup> Willem de



*Carolus de Houtman*

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Milde, however, another Dutch envoy to Sana, had been far less successful. His stay there proved a catalogue of problems, most of his own creation, so that much of his time was wasted on political negotiations to put things right.

These are only a few examples of the skilfulness with which merchants from the Netherlands adapted to different countries and comported themselves as courtiers and diplomats in Africa and Asia. Nevertheless, from a formal point of view, the contradiction in the title of this paper — “merchants as diplomats” — remains. In general, merchants are not regarded as diplomats, nor do diplomats consider themselves merchants. In the opinion of many diplomats, trading was deemed taboo for quite a long time, especially during the seventeenth century. Diplomats were mostly noblemen who represented their king at a different court; being courtiers, they had rights and a code of conduct of their own. Merchants were also bound by rules and customs. Their duty to their master obliged them to take the utmost care of the ships and cargo in their charge, and to return with a profit—a distinctly worldly orientation abhorred by seventeenth century diplomats, for whom the reputation of their sovereign mattered far more than material lucre (even when this sometimes led to worldly profit being deliberately overlooked).<sup>31</sup> Opposed to the diplomat, whose sole aim was to maintain his master’s honour, stood the compliant, flexible merchant, who was willing to adjust himself wherever profit was likely to be made, an image often portrayed in literature. In diplomatic practice, the ambassador held a position of his own, which was not to be confused with that of a merchant. He was the pre-eminent representative of the person of the sovereign, and thus could claim a comparable position in diplomatic relations.<sup>32</sup> Envoys of a lower rank, usually acting as delegates for the government, never represented the king in person, although their function was acknowledged in international law. But this was not the case for so-called “agents,” who served as representatives in towns of commerce and assumed a much humbler position.

In the early seventeenth century, the ranks that a diplomat could hold had not yet been definitively established. Furthermore, the Dutch Republic had not as yet obtained clear sovereign status, a condition that only changed after the Peace of Munster in 1648, when all the European states acknowledged the sovereignty

of the Dutch Republic. Until then, the position of the Republic’s representatives in matters of diplomacy had been vague. Often, foreign noblemen looked with disdain upon Dutch diplomats who, in their eyes, were the mere descendents of merchants.

Merchants were not held in high regard at the royal courts in Asia either,<sup>33</sup> although they were regarded with a certain ambivalence. Many oriental sovereigns were themselves actively involved in their state’s trade. Furthermore, the riches and wares of prestige that the foreigners brought with them aroused their admiration as well as envy and suspicion. The Sultan of Patani could not have expressed this better: when presented with a giant stone cannonball by a Chinese merchant, which proved to be too large to

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shoot from any cannon in his kingdom, he said: “There we have it, this Chinese Captain, who is but a mere merchant, presents us a cannonball. But we, the king of a country, don’t even possess a cannon to shoot it from. Thus we are put to shame in front of all foreign countries.”<sup>34</sup> This ambivalence towards strangers was felt particularly strongly throughout the Malay world. Many kings, each with limited power and economic resources, were engaged in a continual power struggle. They spared no means to stab each other in the back.<sup>35</sup> In such a climate, a king’s treasury and position could benefit from good relations with foreign tradesmen. So from the moment of their first arrival, European traders were used as pawns in local political games. As mentioned earlier, in 1596 De Houtman had serious trouble holding his own in the political minefields around the Straits of Malacca. As in Europe, it was exactly this state of affairs that made sovereigns want



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to keep themselves informed of their neighbours' plans, or to settle disputes so they could regularly exchange messengers or envoys. Soon after De Houtman, Van Spilbergen and other Dutchmen arrived in Asia, and diplomatic relations grew quite busy between the Malayan rulers and the Portuguese. Apart from the three major powers—Portuguese Malacca, Johor and Aceh—there were various small kingdoms around the Straits of Malacca that switched political sides on a regular basis. The result was a shifting, unstable hierarchy, particularly opaque to newcomers.

As mentioned above, embassies and delegations were not a new thing in Asia. The requirements for ambassadors were not so very different from the European demands of that era. An insight into Iranian views on this matter is given in the book *The Ship of Sulaiman*, written by Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim, who was secretary of the delegation sent to King Narai of Siam (now Thailand) under Shah Sulaiman of Iran in 1685.<sup>36</sup> What makes the Iranian visit to Siam particularly interesting is that it coincided with the embassy sent by King Louis XIV of France. As a result of this coincidence, Muhammad Rabi was able to form an opinion of European customs in matters of diplomacy. Moreover, he talked with the head of the Dutch factory in Ayutthaya on several occasions.<sup>37</sup> According to Muhammad Rabi, a sovereign had to be well informed as to the quality of his servants, able to assess their administrative capacities, and confident that they would strike the right note at public appearances:

"The Sultan's ambassador must be a man of perfect intelligence, a clear-sighted councillor who knows his job thoroughly and has spent much time in the past acquiring experience... [who] is quick to appraise a new situation, is true to his word and has an honest reputation... Wise scholars and men of learning have pointed out that the ambassador is the king's own tongue. Whoever wishes to judge the intentions of a foreign king can read an ambassador as if he were the title page of the king's heart and tongue... Indeed, there is no other way to assess a distant ruler but through the discrimination and skill he has displayed in choosing his envoy. If the envoy is eloquent and succeeds in impressing his host with his praiseworthy behaviour, that is a sure sign that the king has ability in evaluating men's character... Every wise councillor declares that the ambassador must be brave, clever in his speech and generally forceful."<sup>38</sup>

This phrasing is strongly reminiscent of the European notion that an ambassador represents the king's person. The European envoy had to adopt a worthy and modest pose, and at the same time he had to stand up for his master's honour, be loyal and honest towards his rulers, eloquent, amiable, courteous, altruistic and just towards his subordinates. He had to be generous in his behaviour. It was assumed that grandeur was based on moral superiority, not on fortune or descent.<sup>39</sup>

Muhammad Rabi emphasises the representative side of an ambassador's duties rather than the task of gathering information, which in Europe was considered to be one of the main responsibilities of a diplomat.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless the Iranian gives a detailed account of Siam. His emphasis on the representative side of the embassy probably derives from his perception of Iran's relation to Siam. Repeatedly he reveals his notion that Siamese were people of inferior rank and that Iran was a superior, more developed civilization.<sup>41</sup> In his opinion, the embassy to Siam was a benevolent response to King Narai's mission to the Iranian court: "Shah Sulaiman saw fit to grace the Siamese king with the glimpse of his bounty and thereby raise that king above his peers."<sup>42</sup> The formal reception occupies a major place in Muhammad Rabi's account, as it also did among the accounts of European diplomats of his time. When the French arrived and outshone all other embassies present in Siam at that moment, Rabi decided to discover why Christian diplomacy proved so effective. According to him, of all the "pagan" rulers, the Christians were especially dedicated to the planning of their embassies. Future diplomats were trained for their duties right from childhood, while great effort was put into the preparation of diplomatic missions. He also noted that an internal hierarchy among the members of an embassy had been established so as to avoid any problems of succession in the case of the death of the delegation's leader. This had happened to the Iranian mission and had given rise to great difficulty.<sup>43</sup>

In both Asia and Europe, a distinction was made between ambassadors and other representatives of foreign powers. Everywhere, great diversity in the ranks was evident. The way in which the Siamese welcomed the Iranian and French ambassadors in 1685, as well as the location of this welcome, makes it crystal clear that they enjoyed a much higher status than the Dutch who represented the VOC *in situ*. The pomp and

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circumstance on that occasion were considerably greater than when a Dutchman visited the court. The Company left it to the head of the factory in Ayutthaya to maintain relations. This was usually a senior merchant, who only dealt with political affairs when it became unavoidable. The long, relatively smooth relationship between Siam and the VOC came under pressure in the 1680s, with the arrival of the French embassy and the Siamese court's appointment of a Greek *phraklang*, or Minister of Foreign Relations.<sup>44</sup> When comparing the reception of the Dutch chief to that of the Iranian and French embassies, one notices differences as well as similarities. After the first grand entrance of an envoy into Siam, there were meetings with the prince that bore a more casual, *ad hoc* character. The manner in which Johannes Keyts, chief in Siam from 1685 until 1689, was received on several occasions by King Narai was very similar to certain audiences with the Persians. After being summoned to meet the sovereign, they were assigned to an open-air location in one of the inner courtyards of the palace. There they had to wait until the prince passed by. This "passing by" has to be taken literally, since for the prince the meetings with the Iranians and Dutch were only a brief intermezzo on his way out. Sometimes these meetings took place in one of the outer courtyards, itself a clear indication that these were not important encounters. After all, the closer to the centre of the palace, the higher the status of the visitor. In passing, the king, who was seated on top of an elephant, exchanged a few words with his visitors, who had to lie stretched out and face down, without being allowed to look at the king. These audiences, if one can rightly call them such, sometimes took place outside the palace altogether - for example, during an elephant hunt, on which occasion the king often handed out *kerisses* and garments.<sup>45</sup>

The official entrance made by the Iranian and French ambassadors was of an entirely different order altogether. Here the reception of the Iranians bore much more resemblance to that of the French. Both embassies were welcomed with great pomp and ceremony and invited to stay in houses built especially for the occasion at the expenses of the Siamese sovereign. The envoys were picked up in ships and sedans ornately decorated with gold. According to Dutch onlookers, the French received by far the most honour: their house was "equipped in such a fashion that one would think it was the King of France himself

who had come to stay." The rest of the reception was in no way inferior: "an incredible contraption of 100 gilded tug vessels transported His Excellency and all his retinue from here into town. Once on land, His Excellency was put onto a gilded throne and the ordinary ambassador onto another beautiful chair. For the retinue a group of saddled horses stood ready. Thereafter the gifts were transported to the palace on a covered stretcher just in front of the embassy with king's guards marching on either side."<sup>46</sup> By comparison, the formal reception of the Iranians was simpler: together with their servants they rode to the court on beautifully adorned horses, while elephants decorated with vibrant colours were posted along the route. The doors of the palace stood wide open and the courts were filled with soldiers. There they also encountered the pavilion that King Narai had built especially to house the letter from Shah Sulaiman. The whole reception and its protocol evolved round these royal letters,<sup>47</sup> for in the eyes of the Siamese it was not the ambassador who represented the Iranian king but his letters—as the French were soon to discover. According to the French diplomat De La Loubère, the Siamese rulers regarded envoys as mere messengers whose task was to deliver the royal letters. In this view, anyone who carried such a letter was an ambassador, whether or not they were noblemen or courtiers of high rank. Both at the Iranian and French audience, King Narai refused to accept the letter directly from the ambassador. At this point, two conceptions of diplomacy collided: to both the French and the Iranians, the diplomat represented his ruler, whereas in the eyes of the Siamese it was the letter which served this purpose. The Iranian and French accounts of the reception of the royal letter paint virtually the same picture. In both cases the ambassadors initially wanted to hand the letter to the king themselves. The problem was, however, that the prince was seated so high up in his hall of audience that the ambassador would have needed a ladder to reach the king's level. Moreover, the French envoy found the requirement to kneel full length on the floor hard to accept. Because he was a representative of his king, this was an unacceptable request! In the end he was permitted to remain upright. A similar solution was found in the case of the Iranian envoys. They too were allowed to honour King Narai in the same fashion in which they would pay homage to their own ruler. In both cases, the letter was handed



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to the king by way of a plate on the end of a stick, after which the king paid royal tribute to the documents.<sup>48</sup>

From the accounts of the reception of the Iranian, French and the Dutch, one can easily deduce their hierarchy. The degree of honour accorded to the former two parties had never in all those years been offered to the Dutch. No houses were ever built especially for them, nor did they ever receive food at the court. In this respect, the Dutch position was rather like that of an agent in a European city: their diplomatic status was low, yet because of their constant presence, they were probably much better informed of what went on in the country in question.

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In contrast to seventeenth-century Europe, where delegations were increasingly being exchanged on a reciprocal basis, most embassies in Asia were unilateral. This makes the French-Siamese and Iranian-Siamese exchange of envoys exceptional. In neither case, however, did this lead to any practical agreements or contracts. Although religious matters and business affairs were discussed with both embassies, the ceremonial meaning of these visits was probably what mattered to King Narai, particularly inasmuch as they contributed to enhancing his status. Indeed, foreign merchants in Ayutthaya, Siam's capital, attributed the diplomatic exchange to Narai's wish to gain fame and make his name known throughout the world.<sup>49</sup> Contemporary Siamese chronicles, in which King Narai is said to have "enlightened far-off countries with his fame and virtues," also emphasize this.<sup>50</sup> This interpretation of the king's frequent diplomatic activities does not seem far-fetched. Embassies were important in determining one's status. Both in Europe and in Asia, sending out a delegation was considered proof of subordination.<sup>51</sup> A striking example of this can be found in the Siamese relation to the Malay world. The latter's subordinate position was often expressed by sending the renowned *bunga emas dan perak*, the gold and silver flower, a species of miniature tree, as an

acknowledgement of submission. Around 1600, Siam laid claim to supreme rule over the Malayan kingdoms on the peninsula and in Sumatra.<sup>52</sup> The Buddhist Siamese rulers went so far as to give themselves the title of "Sultan," to indicate that they considered themselves lords of ancient Malacca—even though the rulers of Malacca had later converted to Islam. In the Malay world, Malacca counted as the kingdom with the highest status. Before the Portuguese conquered Malacca, many Malayan kingdoms had adopted its laws, traditions and the way in which its royal court was organised. The Siamese rulers demanded to be honoured and paid tribute according to their power. Subordinate rulers were held hostage in Ayutthaya for long periods of time,<sup>53</sup> though, so it is hardly surprising that candidates for such embassies were not always easy to find, no matter how skilfully the chronicles of Patani concealed this unwillingness to go to Siam.<sup>54</sup> Local rulers of lower rank were not the only ones included in Siamese courtly circles; so were the Dutch and other Europeans who had established themselves in Ayutthaya. The head of the Dutch factory received the rank of *phrai*, or "man of the king." Formally, every *phrai* had a number of the king's subjects at his disposal, although it is not clear whether these subordinates were assigned to the Dutch chiefs in practice. Perhaps their function was primarily symbolic, intended to mark the Dutch chiefs' position. On the occasion of an audience or other formality at the royal court, the king would often hand out *kerises* or garments as a token of good will. Chiefs who had rendered the king an important service were sometimes even promoted to a higher rank.

This depiction of the hierarchy around Malacca and Siam does not cover the entire system in Southeast Asia. The rulers of Siam, for their part, were subordinates of the Chinese kingdom. Indeed, there were Siamese missions to Peking.<sup>55</sup>

China, as of old, was not keen to receive strangers or grant entry to envoys of other rulers. The "Middle Realm" considered itself to be the centre of the world, beyond whose borders lived barbarians, people whose company one did better to avoid.<sup>56</sup> Strangers were only allowed in if this became inevitable. Depending on their power, outsiders could sometimes force their way into the country. The world could not be permanently

Facilities expressly built for the king's envoys, in Guy Tachard, *Voyage de Siam des pères jésuites envoyés par le roi aux Indes et à la Chine*, 1686.

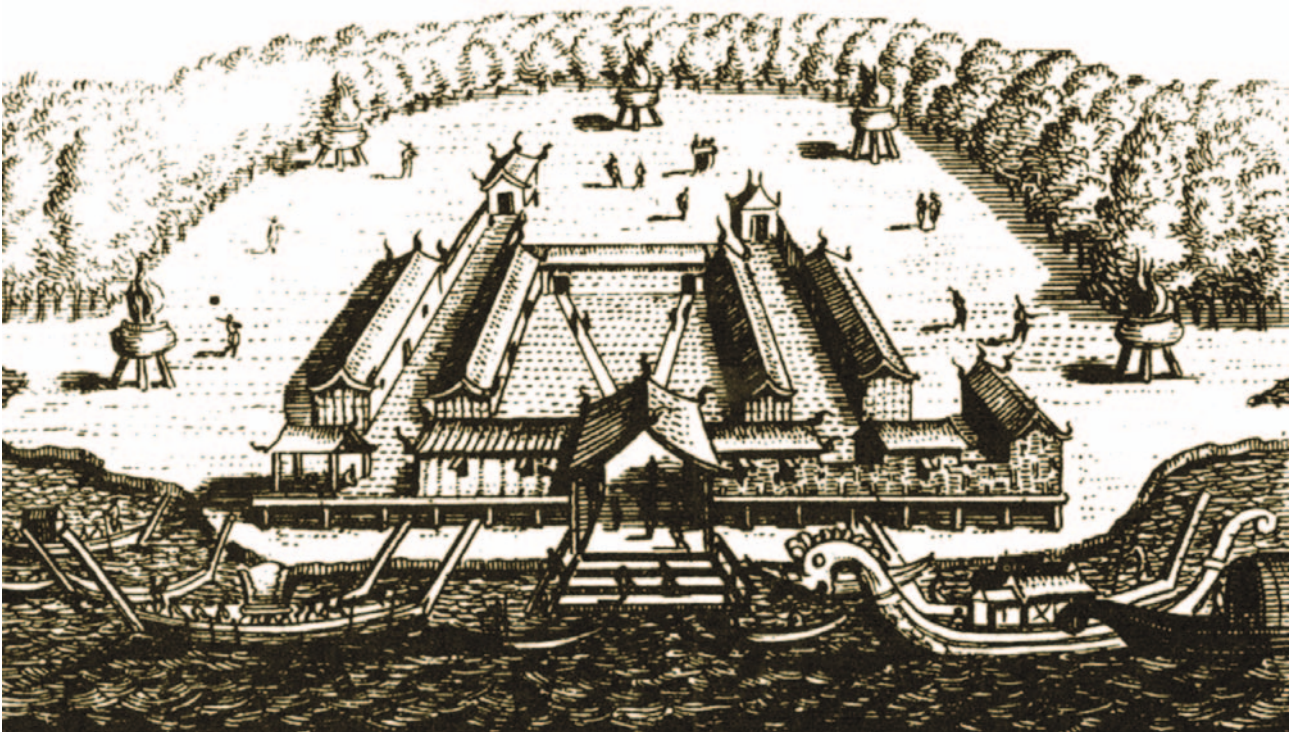
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excluded, either on land or at sea, so in the course of time a *modus vivendi* was established. The Chinese set up two departments in Peking, one to deal especially with the barbarians on the borders and another to manage their relations with those barbarians who came from overseas. The foreigners who were granted entry were considered envoys from the outer world who had come to pay tribute and respect to the emperor. In practice, these missions were used as an excuse to trade. The Chinese royal court allowed this, partly because the Chinese needed the goods and partly because it was simply not always possible to keep out all those strangers. Even when trade was their only purpose, these visits were always presented as embassies. As part of the ritual of reception, the barbarians were granted an audience in the imperial palace in Peking. They were given elaborate instructions beforehand on where and how to kneel. On these occasions, the emperor was seated at such a distance and height that the envoys could hardly distinguish him, so direct contact was out of the question. The reception had to be seen more as a confirmation of their mutual contact, after which the barbarians were treated to a bountiful banquet and were then expected to leave.<sup>57</sup>

Much to their surprise, many Dutchmen who made embassies to China were sent home at the very moment they expected finally to get down to business.

Given that the Chinese considered these embassies as tributes to their emperor, it is understandable that these relations were unilateral in character. This lack of reciprocity constitutes the main difference with European diplomacy. It was not only Dutch but other Europeans too who were mistaken on this point; for instance, the English ambassadors to Peking in 1793 and 1816.<sup>58</sup>

The mission of Pieter van Hoorn, an Amsterdam patrician, to China in the mid-seventeenth century is another example of misjudgement between people of different cultures. His embassy was well prepared: the Council of the Indies had consulted various archives on relations with China and had set out extensive instructions on its goals. Van Hoorn had carefully selected his retinue. One can safely say that both the envoy and his supervisors had done everything that was expected of a European embassy. However, the long and costly enterprise did not bring the desired results, for no direct contact with the emperor was ever established. As his visit drew to



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an end, Van Hoorn received a letter on the part of the emperor informing the Dutch, very politely, that they were not welcome and that a visit once every eight years would suffice. Van Hoorn had achieved exactly the opposite of the VOC's intentions. The Dutch had initiated this expedition in order to gain access to the Chinese market and set up a factory. They had expected to pay visits on a regular basis.<sup>59</sup> But after the royal audience, the message sent by the Chinese court read, "Given that your country is very far off, and that very strong winds blow here that cause grave danger for your ships to come over, taking into account that it is extremely cold here, with hail and snow, it would grieve me deeply if your people came here. If you really wish them to visit, let them come once every eight years, and not more than a hundred men. Twenty of them can set up camp at the palace. There you can take your merchandise, without having to trade at sea off Canton. This I have decided for your own good, trusting that you will be pleased as well."<sup>60</sup> The Dutch could put that in their pipe and smoke it. Once every eight years the Dutch would be allowed to greet the Emperor, among the envoys of many other rulers, in the large square built for this purpose. In return, they were allowed to conduct a little trade. If ever a diplomatic meeting could demonstrate how strongly the Chinese and European views of embassies differed, this failure is it.

In other Asian countries, the offering of gifts also constituted a fixed part of embassies. Just as in China, the visit and gifts were seen as a form of tribute.<sup>61</sup> The VOC put a lot of effort into collecting curiosities and prestigious objects that could serve as gifts for Asian rulers. Being a commercial organisation, the VOC kept a close eye on the expenses involved, and was keen to determine the exact value of gifts received in return. Whenever personnel of the VOC were given a special *keris*, carpet or jewels by a king, they were first appraised, after which the recipient was allowed to keep the gifts after paying for them. From the value of the gifts one can deduce a certain hierarchy: the more important the relation or more powerful the sovereign, the more valuable the gift the VOC offered.<sup>62</sup> With subordinate kings or vassals, the value of reciprocal gifts was limited. The way in which the VOC leadership in Batavia dealt with these gifts shows that it considered this aspect of business a necessary evil, something that could not be avoided and had to be managed professionally. For their

Asian partners, things were much the same. The reception of the French envoys hints at the notion the Siamese held on this matter. When the French did everything possible to convince the Siamese courtiers of the high value of King Louis XIV's gift to King Narai, the Siamese called in the Dutch to appraise the gifts.<sup>63</sup> The kings of Kandy in Ceylon for their part examined the presents from the Dutch with a critical eye. Inferior gifts or worthless knickknacks could easily be taken as a sign that a ruler had diminished in the giver's estimation, or was deliberately being insulted. For example, when Thomas Raffles, the English governor of Java (1811-1816) received a letter of which one corner had been torn off, he was outraged. Not without reason, for the letter had been intended as a test.

Not every country was as closed as China. In India, where the Grand Moguls assumed their country to be the centre of the world, one could do business and strangers were not subjected to the humiliating rituals inflicted in China.<sup>64</sup> Although the Mogul's court was not inclined to enter into agreements with foreigners, privileges were frequently negotiated with representatives of Dutch and English trading companies. These were then granted unilaterally in royal *firmans*. During the first years of European presence, many Indian rulers sought to override the trading companies altogether and make direct contact with their rulers in Europe. Later on, the French and other Europeans were granted a place among the Mogul's vassals.<sup>65</sup> To be paid tribute was by no means the sole motive for letting these strangers in: there was the chance to charge European merchants for the right to trade in India as well. The gifts the Moguls received sometimes had a value of many hundreds of thousands of euros. For instance, the embassy of the Dutch ambassador Joan Josua Ketelaar to the Grand Mogul in 1711 through 1713, cost the VOC the equivalent of over 500,000 euros, half of which was spent on gifts to the king and his courtiers.<sup>66</sup> The expenses of this embassy were especially high because Shah Alam Bahadur Shah died shortly after the Dutch envoy had handed over their presents. To curry favour with his successor Jahandar Shah, Ketelaar had to present him with great gifts as well.

Rituals and forms of address played an important part in the reception of embassies. An example of how clearly they reflected political relations can be found in the connection between the VOC and the rulers of



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"Vue de Siam", in Guy Tachard, *Voyage de Siam des pères jésuites envoyés par le roi aux Indes et à la Chine*, 1686.

Kandy in Ceylon and those of Mataram on Java. Until 1766, the Dutch governor of Colombo used to send an embassy to the ruler of Kandy each year. The Dutch envoys would ask permission to have cinnamon peeled in the king's domain and to transport elephants they had caught in the South to the harbour of Jaffna, crossing Kandian territory. The king regarded this visit as an expedition to pay tribute. The Dutch along the coast lived in his territory and thus were his subjects. After the Dutch had expelled the Portuguese from the island, the Company and the ruler of Kandy had agreed that the king would get the conquered territories in return for cinnamon to compensate for the Dutch war efforts. Because the VOC thought the payment insufficient, it kept the coastal areas in its possession. The Dutch did, however, acknowledge they were *stadholder* on behalf of the king of Kandy. It was not until after a war in 1766 that the Dutch acquired actual ownership over these coastal areas. When another embassy left for Kandy, the Dutch were told to ensure that their new relationship be expressed in their

reception at the royal court. On his part, the Kandian ruler did everything possible to maintain the old ritual whereby the Dutch paid tribute to him while lying stretched out on the ground. Whether or not the court was successful in imposing this condition varied according to the political and economic circumstances of the moment, but in the eyes of the Dutch, these unnecessary and time-consuming rituals ruined the atmosphere of many embassies. This is why, during the fourth Anglo-Dutch war in 1782, the Dutch envoys to Kandy were given instructions to stick to protocol and only comply with the old ritual after strong protest, "as an excellent sign of our friendship."<sup>67</sup> This beautiful phrase had to conceal the military weakness of the Company, for in India the English had defeated the Dutch time and time again. Nevertheless, the Kandy court did not accept English proposals that they form an alliance, but instead used the weakened Dutch position to reinstate the old ritual.<sup>68</sup> This illustrates a clash between two political powers, not between political cultures. For both parties, their honour was at

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stake. The Dutch—who, according to the peace treaty, had gained equality with Kandy—had difficulty in resigning themselves to the king's demands because the ceremony would promptly nullify this equality. On his part, the king found the slur on his status hard to accept because it involved a territorial as well as material reverse. For both parties, it was impossible to detach the form of the ritual from the contents of their relationship.

Although Kandy succeeded in standing firm, the contact with the Dutch on Java had a different outcome. There the VOC evolved from the status of a vassal paying tribute to the rulers of Mataram in 1680 into the supreme ruler of this central Javanese kingdom in 1740. This power shift was the result of wars of succession that had repeatedly afflicted the ruling dynasty. In order to keep their throne, several rulers had sought assistance from Batavia. Once the king came to power, he handed over income and lands in exchange for Dutch assistance. The Company also accepted payment in the form of monopolies on certain products.<sup>69</sup> In this way the VOC gradually loosened itself from its subordinate position and became an equal ruler that eventually, in 1748, “inherited” the whole kingdom from Mataram.<sup>70</sup> This new relationship also manifested itself in ceremonies and forms of address. The rulers of Mataram used to address the governor-general in their letters as “Grandfather”: the greatest honour they could bestow. Initially the Company's visits to the court had been formal embassies to pay tribute.<sup>71</sup> Later on, as Dutch power grew, the Dutch Resident in Mataram became a kind of ambassador whose task, among others, was to collect information on relations at the royal court.<sup>72</sup> Other Indonesian vassals used similar terms based on family relations. Allies, for instance, addressed each other as “friend” to express their equality.<sup>73</sup>

### A COMPARISON BETWEEN EUROPEAN AND ASIAN DIPLOMACY

As can be gathered from the foregoing review of Dutch-Asian relations in early modern times, European and Asian diplomacy were in many ways similar, but had their individual characteristics as well. From this, one can conclude, firstly, that several systems of international relations existed beside one another in maritime Asia, the area in which the VOC

traded. The word “system” suggests a certain rigidity, but here it is used to indicate the exchange of envoys between states.

Secondly, certain states only admitted foreign representatives on a limited scale, embedded within a context of strict rules. They hardly ever sent envoys abroad themselves; some never sent any at all. Striking examples of such isolationism were China and Japan. The latter decided in 1641 to refuse entry to all foreigners, with the exception of the Chinese and Dutch, who were allowed to trade on two man-made islands off the coast of Nagasaki. The Tokugawa rulers had closed off Japan after a long period of internal wars in which the Portuguese and their Catholic converts had played a part. The Dutch were expected to undertake embassies to Edo (now Tokyo) on a regular basis. A thorough investigation took place if anyone who was neither Chinese nor Dutch got stranded on Japanese shores or otherwise tried to get into the country.<sup>74</sup> China regulated the admission of foreigners through a system of tribute. Two harbours were allocated for conducting enough trade to meet their need for certain commodities: one for Chinese skippers and a second, Canton, for other nationalities, where merchants were only allowed to stay during the commercial season. Occasionally China would send out envoys, but only as messengers, bearers of an imperial edict. These were mostly men of low rank who had little liberty to negotiate. In 1679, the Qing dynasty sent a few messengers, accompanied by a hundred soldiers, to Batavia, to ask for the assistance of Dutch ships.<sup>75</sup> There the Dutch government received the Chinese with “an extraordinary mixture of Dutch, southeast Asian, and Chinese pomp and ceremony, drawing heavily on the ceremonies the Dutch had evolved in their relations with Southeast Asian princes.”<sup>76</sup> Just before the imperial letter was to be handed over, a minor argument arose between the Governor-General Van Goens and the Chinese delegation leader, because the Dutchman kept his hat on instead of accepting the letter bareheaded. Van Goens reacted by saying that the Chinese found themselves in a foreign country and had to be content with the honour that was granted to other Asian rulers as well. Van Goens was apparently not aware that, in the eyes of the Chinese, he was a vassal who had to pay tribute and bow to the imperial letter.<sup>77</sup> His remarks clearly indicate that the Dutch in Batavia regarded themselves as sovereigns.







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local relations. Embassies in which the Dutch leader assumed the role of ambassador were undertaken only in exceptional cases. High costs kept these visits to a minimum. Asian rulers preferred to maintain contacts with men of their own social station in Europe, but representatives of European trade companies only rarely answered their calls. Sir Thomas Roe's embassy to the Grand Mogul in 1615 counts as an exception.<sup>79</sup> This meant that almost all everyday contact was conducted by merchants, people who in Europe would be referred to as "agents." Some of them showed true diplomatic talent in dealing with their Asian counterparts and were able to conduct themselves as courtiers. But great and costly embassies led by important VOC servants—which the Europeans considered to be the real delegations—were, in the eyes of Asian rulers, tribute missions. Thus embassies were undertaken on a limited scale; only in Ceylon did the VOC send envoys to Kandy on an annual basis. With everyday business taken care of, the Europeans had no need for permanent embassies. The French attempt to establish one in Siam failed miserably: the envoy ran off with his tail between his legs.<sup>80</sup> Van Hoorn also left China in a hurry once he realised there was nothing to be gained there.<sup>81</sup>

In China and Japan, the strict policy towards foreigners prevented permanent embassies from being established, while in other parts of Asia it was more a question of the tribute system standing in the way of a permanent presence. On the one hand, sending an envoy was a sign that the envoy was of lower rank; while on the other hand, a visit to foreign courts was not without risk: sometimes envoys were taken hostage by their hosts.<sup>82</sup> In addition, the constant struggles for

position in the hierarchy prevented an exchange based on equality: during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, several kingdoms gained power and did everything possible to enhance their status.<sup>83</sup> In Europe, the inequality between kingdoms was overcome by a generally accepted order of rank in which every nation was assigned its place and acknowledged the sovereignty of others. After 1648, the Westphalian system offered the possibility of permanent diplomatic relations, and rules were formulated that applied to all envoys and guaranteed their safety.<sup>84</sup>

As long as the contacts between Europe and Asia were restricted mainly to trade, the European nations were able to manage with the use of agents and incidental embassies. But once the VOC gained territorial and political power, it conducted itself as an Asian power, as can be seen in Ceylon and in the Indonesian Archipelago. The Asians and Europeans were well matched when it came to maintaining their own standing. Both parties knew all too well that status not only reflected existing power, but could also be used to gain or increase it. **RC**



## NOTES

- 1 Commelin 1646: 37.
- 2 Commelin 1646: 40-42; Foreest & de Booy 1980: Vol. I, 15-27.
- 3 Purbatjaraka 1962: 1-9.
- 4 Blussé 1999: 8.
- 5 Resink 1968: 107-149, 189-267.
- 6 Alexandrowicz 1967: 15.
- 7 Anderson 1998: 67, 58, 228-231, 255, 256.
- 8 Heringa 1961: 423, 424.
- 9 Roelofsen 1983: 3-21.
- 10 Pidal 1958: 9-49; Böhm 1936: 174-183.
- 11 Kern & Terpstra 1955: 23, 57.
- 12 Holk & Roelofsen 1983: 14.
- 13 Boogaart 2000.
- 14 Unger 1948: 15.

- 15 Unger 1948: 17.
- 16 Unger 1948: 45, 47-5-, 69-111.
- 17 Iskandar 1959: 58, 136.
- 18 Iskandar 1959 mentions a marriage between a princess from Perak and an Acehnese prince (pp. 54, 55).
- 19 Unger 1948: 30, 31.
- 20 Unger 1948: 73.
- 21 Pinto 1997: 135-147.
- 22 Pinto 1997: 144.
- 23 Cf. Lombard 1967: 122-125.
- 24 Lombard 1967: 117, 118.
- 25 Lombard 1967: 32, 47; also Spilbergen 1997: 23, 24; Commelin 1646: 41.
- 26 Subrahmanyam 1977: 36-49.

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- 27 Ratelband 1950: 29, 30, 31, 44.
- 28 Ratelband 1950: 29.
- 29 Ratelband 1950: 95.
- 30 Also Brouwer 1980: nr. 9,10, 713-742, 715.
- 31 Anderson 1998: 64-67; see also Mattingly 1962: 211.
- 32 Heringa 1961: 22.
- 33 Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 109; Unger 1948: 72.
- 34 Teeuw & Wyatt 1970: 76, 152.
- 35 Pinto 1997: 144 - 147.
- 36 The text can be found in Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 107-109.
- 37 The Hague, National Archives, VOC 1438, 652-653; Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 167-169.
- 38 Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 107, 108.
- 39 Heringa 1961: 31-57; Mattingly 1962: 211-223.
- 40 Anderson 1993: 52.
- 41 Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 69, 80, 109, 121.
- 42 Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 19, 20.
- 43 Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 48, 58, 108, 109.
- 44 Goor 1991: 445-469.
- 45 Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 65, 66, 74; Goor 2000: 55, 56.
- 46 NA., VOC 1415 916-918, 925, 928.
- 47 Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 60-65; La Loubère 1693: 108.
- 48 Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 64, 65.
- 49 NA, VOC 1415 895, 896 and 914, 915; Muhammad Rabi Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim 1972: 81.
- 50 Coedès 1914: 25.
- 51 Heringa 1961: 20.
- 52 Kemp, 1969: 34, 35.
- 53 Teeuw 1970: 155-157.
- 54 Teeuw 1970: 165-168.
- 55 Wills 1984: 15, 17, 23, 40.
- 56 Wills 1984: 5-25; Blussé 1989: 11-23.
- 57 Wills 1984: 1-5.
- 58 The embassy of 1793 was under Lord Macartney; in 1816 Lord Amherst was ambassador. Both Englishmen were regarded as tribute-bearers. The requests Lord Macartney made on behalf of George III, who in the eyes of the Chinese was a vassal, were denied. Lord Amherst was even denied an audience, because he refused to comply with the rules of the royal court. Cf. Woodcock 1969: 59.
- 59 For an analysis of this embassy, see Wills 1984: 38-82 and 145-170; for an account of the voyage to the royal court, see Nieuhof 1987.
- 60 Quoted from Nieuhof 1987: 28.
- 61 Nieuhof 1987: 51; Wills 1984: 30.
- 62 See Goor 1994: 131-135.
- 63 NA, VOC 1415 fol. 916, 917.
- 64 Alexandrowicz 1967: 17.
- 65 Alexandrowicz 1967: 31-38, 90-95.
- 66 Vogel 1937: 357-393.
- 67 L.J. Wagenaar 1996: 441-467.
- 68 Goor 1986: 37-53, 42.
- 69 Nagtegaal 1986: 66-73.
- 70 Graaf 1949: 264.
- 71 Cf. Graaf 1956 and Goens 1995.
- 72 Ricklefs 1974: 367.
- 73 E.g. VOC 3558, fol. 351-382; letters from Asian rulers to Batavia, received in 1780.
- 74 Cf. the reception of Carolus van der Haeghe in Japan, in Parmentier 1994: 52-57; 132-151.
- 75 Such requests were a regular occurrence; see for instance Aceh and Banten, at the beginning of the seventeenth century.
- 76 Wills 1974: 180.
- 77 Wills 1974: 181.
- 78 Meilink-Roelofs 1974: 5, 6.
- 79 Alexandrowicz 1967: 191-199.
- 80 NA, VOC 1440, fol. 2497, 2499.
- 81 Nieuhof 1987: 28.
- 82 For example, see Teeuw 1970: 78-81, 91-95, 154-157, 165-168.
- 83 Tarling 1992: 428-436.
- 84 Consider, for example, the behaviour of the rulers of Kandy and that of other European diplomats who all placed considerations of status before territorial profit.

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