
Using Propaganda to Understand English and Dutch views of the Indies, Asia, and Each Other in the Early 1600's

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In February 1623 events on the other side of the world from Britain and the Netherlands would strain the relationship between these two nations for the next century. On Amboyna, one of the Spice Islands (known colloquially as the Banda Islands) in Indonesia, a lone Japanese soldier asked a few too many questions—launching a conspiracy hunt by the Dutch Garrison. During a trial, that man, along with his fellow sailors and merchants, would be questioned and tortured as part of a search for conspirators. By the end of the trials, the Dutch executed ten Englishmen, nine Japanese, and one Portuguese for confessing to treason. When news of the executions hit Europe, a propaganda war flared. Both sides—the Dutch and the British—issued competing pamphlets assailing the other side's actions at Amboyna. During the subsequent Anglo-Dutch Wars, these pamphlets would be brought out time and again during the subsequent wars. Events on the Spice Islands, as depicted in pamphlets, continued to be debated and helped to fuel the fires of war.

The question of whether or not the executed men ever intended to seize the Dutch fort in Amboyna has been argued fervently to this day. Historians such as Karen Chancey argue that the English could not have taken the Island because they lacked the manpower for such an undertaking and had no reinforcements nearby.¹ Instead, the Dutch wanted to use the occasion to oust English competition in the Moluccas. Other scholars, such as D. K. Bassett and Alison Games, argued that it did not matter if the English could have taken the fort or not: the Dutch truly believed the English wanted to take it.² While both sides made good points, this paper approaches the question from a different perspective: that of looking at the propaganda produced by both factions to better understand English and Dutch views of the Indies, Asia, and each other in the seventeenth century. While much of the printed materials of the 1620s amounts to propaganda, it still provides important revelations about international relations and the Banda Islands. In other words, this paper, while not ignoring the charges of conspiracy and torture, instead asks what the English and Dutch knew about the Spice Islands and trade in the 1620s.

The conflict over the Spice Islands happened in the early seventeenth century, when European nations were looking to establish trading companies to import spices and goods from the East. Two of the most influential companies emerged at the turn of the century. The first was the British East India Company or EIC, created in the 1600s. The second and initially more profitable was the Dutch East India Company (VOC). The Dutch East India Company formed in 1602 and started with 540,000 guilders, a sum more than eight times the amount invested in the EIC when it formed.³ This was due to the fact that the Dutch allowed all citizens to invest in the company, not just a few hundred wealthy shareholders, as in the EIC's case. Since the VOC possessed more

¹ Karen Chancey, "The Amboyna Massacre in English Politics, 1624-1632," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 30, no. 4 (1998): 583-98.

² D.K. Bassett, "English Trade in Celebes, 1613-1667" *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 31, no. 1 (181) (1958): 1-39; Alison Games, "Anglo-Dutch Connections and Overseas Enterprises: A Global Perspective on Lion Gardiner's World," *Early American Studies, An Interdisciplinary Journal* 9, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 435-61.

³ Robert Markley, *The Far East and the English Imagination, 1600-1730* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 50.

capital, the Dutch functioned more effectively on the other side of the world than the EIC. Lacking the resources of the Dutch East India Company, the British focused on short-term moneymaking ventures to turn a quick profit; while the Dutch used their capital to establish a system capable of working over a long period of time. Thus, the Dutch made multiple calls on their many journeys to India and back. First, vessels would stop in China to sell silver bullion, then reinvest in Chinese silks, which were subsequently sold in Japan for copper and gold. These metals then were sold in India for textiles, which were traded in the Spice Islands for cloves, maces, and nutmeg. The Dutch returned to Europe with valuable spices. At each point in this cycle, the VOC profited by selling products in demand at their various markets.⁴

This said, the English and Dutch did not operate entirely independent from each other in the East Indies. According to historian Miles Ogborn, “The Dutch and the English shared an interest in breaking the monopoly of the Portuguese, but they were also competing against one another for valuable cargoes, for the political alliances with local powers, and for control over the markets in Europe that would produce profits for their shareholders and taxes for their governments.”⁵ In 1619, the Dutch and the English in Europe negotiated a treaty that was supposed to have their East India Companies work together. The short version of it had the English paying the Dutch one third of the costs of maintenance for forts and upkeep in the Indies for access to one third of the trade. This treaty sounds acceptable on paper for the English, who were having a difficult time getting established in India. In reality though, the English in India despised the treaty. The situation in the Spice Islands proved especially intolerable for the English, as they had to share housing with the Dutch. As Allison Games writes, “This cohabitation grated in important ways. It was not just the daily assaults on their dignity and the high rates the English were charged, although the English regarded these as infuriating insults. It was the inability to find any refuge. Each meal was another occasion to take offence; each month’s reckoning a reminder of Dutch power to extract high wages.” It was under these conditions that the English and Dutch came to clash: the first time in the Banda Islands, and the second on Amboyna Island. Each collision sparked propaganda that proved telling not only for what each group thought of the situation and their rivals, but for how future citizens would view the Indies as these pamphlets provided the propaganda and ideological background for wars between the English and the Dutch.

The Dutch issued the first propaganda volley in 1622 with the pamphlet, *The Hollanders declaration of the affaires of the East Indies*. It opened by declaring: “All the Islands of Banda...were by a special treaty...put under the protection of the high and mighty, the states general of the united Provinces, on condition to defend them from Portugal, and other enemies.”⁶ The legal-minded Dutch saw the East Indies primarily in terms of treaties: Who has treaties with whom, particularly if it is with the Dutch, and if those treaties are being kept. Here the Bandanese are depicted in terms of the treaty that they made with the Dutch for defense, and how that treaty means they owe the Dutch “all their fruits and spices at a fixed price.”⁷ The document proceeds to discuss how the Bandanese, aided by the British, broke their treaty with the Dutch and sold their spices to everyone besides them. A line within the document bemoaned how the Bandanese attacked and murdered people (most likely Dutch). They also stole goods from the warehouses. Yet, the focus remained on the treaties made and broken on the island. When the Dutch stormed the island with force, their justification was not the various attacks by the Bandanese, but the flagrant breakage of the treaty between the two groups. The English were introduced into the document in terms of the newly

⁴ Markley, “*The Far East and the English Imagination*,” 50.

⁵ Games, “Violence on the Fringes: The Virginia and Amboyna Massacres,” *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 99 (July 2014): 505–29.

⁶ *The Hollanders Declaration of the Affaires of the East Indies. ... Faithfully Translated According to the Dutch Copie*, (London, 1622, Early English Books Online, Cambridge University Library), 1.

created treaty between the English and the Dutch. Furthermore, when the Dutch explained their reasoning for invading the Banda Islands, they explained “the Portugals, who are both their and our Enemies, with whom they seek to make nearer alliance of friendship, as already in the great Island named Banda, were some fifty or three score Portugals, who by some more assistance... would have been sufficient to have deprived both the English and the Netherlands Companies of the rights therein.”⁷ The Dutch here claimed a right to attack the Banda Islands because their “rights” would be denied otherwise. What were these prerogatives: in short, the rights they had in their treaty with the Bandanese. In this pamphlet the Dutch linked their case to treaties, except where issues concerned the Portuguese, who were always termed a threat and the word “enemy” was always in the same sentence when Portuguese were mentioned.

The Dutch did not stop with one document outlining their views on the East Indies. They produced sequels making similar claims about what happened in Amboyna. One such document opened by addressing treaties, though this time the treaties were with the people of Amboyna and England; the Dutch accused them of breaking their treaties. The pamphlet blasted the English for refusing to provide the Dutch ships of war as promised by the treaty. By withholding their ships, the English, the Dutch claimed, allowed the Spaniards to trade and emerge a threat into the area. The accusations against the people of Amboyna were worse: they were actually seeking a truce with the Spaniards, which violated their treaty with the Dutch. This added to the fact that the Spaniards were the “ancient adversaries” of both the Dutch and the people of Amboyna. This part pushed credulity: there was no way the Spanish could be ancient enemies of the people of Amboyna—there had not been contact between Europe and the East Indies long enough for that. Since the Spanish could not



Dutch torturing English Prisoners

be ancient enemies of the Ambonese, the Dutch must have viewed those who made treaties with the Dutch, in the Indies, as sharing the same enemies and friends as the Dutch.⁸

The Dutch’s view of the East Indies, as presented in their propaganda, centered intrinsically on treaties. Whether a group kept or broke provisions in treaties determined whether the Dutch saw them as ally or foe. It has only been by following treaties that a nation or group remained morally upright in the eyes of the Dutch. Trouble started when others began breaking the treaties, “as one outrage provokes another.”⁹ The Bandanese and Ambonese were attacked for committing immoral actions, such as murder, which was a clear violation against treaties made with the Dutch. Dutch views of the Portuguese and Spanish, however, were worse; they were morally reprehensible—the “sworn enemies” of the Dutch. To make treaties with the Portuguese or Spanish, only invited trouble from the Dutch.

English views of the East Indies differed from the Dutch on a fundamental level. While the Dutch saw the entire area in terms of treaties, the English view remained more nuanced. The British stressed working out relationships with people in the Indies, such as the Bandanese and the Chinese. This was evident in an English pamphlet which condemned the Dutch invasion of the Banda Islands. “So long as the fight endured, our Factors and

⁷ *The Hollanders Declaration of the Affaires of the East Indies*, 10.

⁸ *A True Relation of the Vnjust, Cruell, and Barbarous Proceedings against the English at Amboyna in the East-Indies*, (1625, Early English Books Online, Cambridge University Libraries), 12-16.

⁹ “*A True Relation*,” 5.

servants there (three English and eight Chinese) kept themselves within doors. ... Nevertheless, they sacked our house, took away all our goods, murdered three of our Chinese servants, bound the rest (as well English as Chinese) hand and foot, and treated then to cut their throats.”¹⁰ Obviously, the English had a working relationship with their Chinese servants, and they did not throw the Chinese servants out during the invasion. Chinese servants suffered the same miserable fate as English servants when the Dutch attacked them.

Compared to the Dutch, the English seemed to appreciate and view others in the Indies, like the people of Banda, in more than just contractual terms. The people of Banda had invited the English to set up business on the Islands through the free consent of the Bandanese.¹¹ This allowed for over eleven years of free trade with the English. When the invasion by the Dutch occurred, the Bandanese looked to the English for defense. While a treaty may have been the basis for this friendship with the Bandanese, it was never brought up. To the English, the people of Banda were allies, but while the English wanted to defend them, they were unable to do so. In fact, they were unable to even defend themselves from the Dutch, much less anyone else.

English pamphlets took a consistently negative view of the Dutch. To the British, the Dutch only succeeded in the East Indies because they used force and violence to get their way.¹² Even the names of English articles about Amboyna emphasize Dutch brutality. For instance, one title read: A true relation of the unjust, cruel and barbarous proceedings against the English.¹³ A woodcut on the cover of the pamphlet reinforced this idea (Figure 1).¹⁴ Here the Dutch are shown torturing the English with water and fire on the top. At the bottom, one Englishman prays on his knees while his executioner stands above him. The scene would have been very powerful to English audiences as torture in England was outlawed. The Dutch would later defend their actions as “soft torture” that did not permanently affect the body. This defense hardly stood up to the scrutiny of the English, who claimed the confessions obtained from the torture were inevitably lies.¹⁵ Thus anything gained from the tortured suspects was worth nothing in the eyes of the English. This whole panel further paints the Dutch as barbarous people. Inside the document, readers learned how the English protested their innocence to the Dutch over and over, yet their pleas fell on deaf ears, and they were tortured into confessing crimes.

Japanese soldiers employed by the Dutch also were depicted in the literature—although readers get little sense of the identity of the Japanese.¹⁶ This would imply that a person in England would have only limited knowledge of Japan, and that Japanese men were often employed by European powers. Some English men viewed the Japanese as sheep-like in Japan, but wolf-like elsewhere.¹⁷ However, the English had little real interaction with the Japanese. As the Dutch

¹⁰ *A Courante of Newes from the East India. ... Written to the East India Company in England from Their Factors There.* (London, 1622, Early English Books Online, Cambridge University Library), 5.

¹¹ *A Courante of Newes from the East India. ... Written to the East India Company in England from Their Factors There*, 5.

¹² “*A Courante of Newes from the East India,*” 1-6.

¹³ John Skinner and Dudley Digges. *A True Relation of the Late Cruell and Barbarous Tortures... As It Hath Byn Lately Delivered to the Kings Most Excellent Maiesty*, 1624, (Early English Books Online, Cambridge University Library).

¹⁴ The water torture used by the by the Dutch was legal in Holland and most of Europe at the time. England was the only exception which had a lot to do with why the English reacted to badly. The torture used by the Dutch is very similar to the waterboarding used by the Bush administration. The reactions to the torture by both the people using the torture and those using it played out remarkably similarly.

¹⁵ John Skinner and Dudley Digges, “*A True Relation of the Late Cruel and Barbarous Tortures,*” 20.

¹⁶ *The Emblem of Ingratitude a True Relation of the Unjust, Cruel, and Barbarous Proceedings ... Modern Records*, 1672, (Early English Books, Cambridge University Library), 9.

¹⁷ Adam Clulow, “Like Lambs in Japan and Devils Outside Their Land: Diplomacy, Violence, and Japanese Merchants in Southeast Asia,” *Journal of World History* 24, no. 2 (2013): 335–58.

¹⁷The Japanese soldiers recruited were often employed as mercenaries by the Dutch and other European powers. It does not seem as though the Japanese government was very upset about the execution of the Japanese soldier. That is probably because

prepared to execute the English and Japanese for treason, the Japanese were said to have called out to the English: “O yee Englishmen, where did we ever in our lives eate with you? Talke with you? Yea or to our remembrance see you?” This implies that the English, even though sharing a treaty with the Dutch, did not interact with the Dutch soldiers. This would seem to suggest that the English do not want to interact with other peoples. Yet, historian Robert Markley describes a related encounter between British and Japanese described in a pamphlet:

In Digges’s Answer unto the Dutch Pamphlet, Price is described as a drunken debauched sot who had threatened Tower and who ‘alone of all the English ... had some kinde of conversation with some of the Japons; that is, he would dice and drinke with them as he likewise did with other Blacks, and with the Dutch also... Price is a threat to the English factory as well as the Dutch because he moves easily among different national communities undermining the imaginary coherence of nation.¹⁸

Digges was doing two important things in his pamphlet. First, by mentioning that Price had “conversation” with the Japanese and non-British peoples, he contradicted the idea that the Japanese never interacted with the British. This flies in the face of other claims that the Japanese had no contacts with the British. Still, the pamphlet blames Price for being too willing to break cultural boundaries, a faux pas for the British. While working with other nationalities was a positive, cultural boundaries had to be maintained.

The propaganda released by the English and the Dutch offers a cornucopia of information about international relations. The Dutch, time and again, viewed the East Indies in terms of treaties. Dutch allies kept their treaties, while enemies broke treaties. The act of breaking a treaty with the Dutch inevitably led to violence on the part of the Dutch, such as in Amboyna and the Banda Islands. The English view tended to be much more nuanced. While treaties played a role in shaping English views of other nations, they are not the only underlying factor. For instance, the English viewed the Dutch as barbarous for using torture and treacherous for breaking their treaties and for the way they acted towards other groups of people. The English viewed other nations as friends, such as the people of the Banda Islands, but ultimately thought all nations needed to keep distinct identities from each other.

Tokugawa had made a statement a few years before that all Japanese outside of Japan were subject to local laws and customs. The Japanese government cared about protecting their authority but not as much about protecting their citizens outside of Japan.

¹⁸ Clulow, “Like Lambs in Japan and Devils Outside Their Land,” 335–58.