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Dutchmen and Javanese: Connected History

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By reconstructing the historical circumstances in which the first contacts between the Dutch, the Malays, and the Javanese occurred at the turn of the seventeenth century, Romain Bertrand offers us a field-defining study, while also demonstrating the heuristic utility of "connected history." At a time of intellectual timidity and spineless caution, Bertrand's book brings a breath of fresh air to the discipline of history.

Reviewed: Romain Bertrand, *L'Histoire à parts égales*, Paris, Seuil, 2011, 670 p., 28,40 euros.

On June 22, 1596, four Dutch ships under the command of Cornelis de Houtman at last set anchor in the Javanese port of Banten. They came in search of valuable spices, particularly black pepper, which was harder to come by ever since their bitter enemy, King Philip II of Spain, had also become king of Portugal in 1580-81. In Banten, Houtman and his men discovered a city of 40,000 inhabitants, a baffling array of languages (Javanese, Malay, Sundanese, etc.), merchants from Persia, Gujarat, and China with well-established networks, and a complex society prone to intense political conflict. Paradoxically, the first "contact" occurred through the mediation of Portuguese go-betweens dispatched by the local authorities.

How would the Dutch be welcomed? And what about this unknown world did they actually understand? This is the starting point of Romain Bertrand's wonderful booka work that is at once

rich, learned, and exciting, written in a style that is elegant and inventive. Its subtle and original structure will undoubtedly surprise, at least initially, readers accustomed to less audacious forms of exposition.

What Is an "Encounter"?

The Dutch travelers found themselves plunged into a world of radical uncertainty. They did not speak the local languages and were ignorant of Banten's customs. They were there to trade; but how can one agree on the conditions of exchange, when everything is unknown or suspect, from the system of weights and measures to monetary equivalencies? This first contact, the author charmingly notes, was full of "petty metrological dramas." The assistance of Chinese intermediaries and local interpreters proved essential to this East Indian commercial adventure. Beyond these facts, however, lurks the deeper question of an encounter's conditions of possibility – that is, of the minimal conventions required for efficient interaction between such distant worlds.

The encounter began with a clash: the Dutch knew nothing of the rules of civility and the codes of conduct that governed high Javanese society. They made one faux pas after another, often despite themselves. They deeply offended the palatial elite's sense of propriety and well-ordered harmony. From the standpoint of the Javanese and Malay conceptions of the socio-political order and the asceticism upon which it depended, Europeans seemed restless, crude, and impolite. Their talk and gestures appeared wild and random, introducing intolerable disorder. Houtman's men were seen as portly brutes. They gambled and drank. Worse still, they stood up when urinating and ate with both hands, which was seen as profoundly ill-mannered. For the elites of the Malay Muslim city-states, such behavior was scandalous. In the eyes of Javanese aristocrats, the Dutch were "merchants with no manners", morals, or sense of honor. In the quarrels that quickly ensued, the craftiness they employed was looked down upon as disgraceful. The "clash" was less a conflict between "cultures" than a social antagonism between a "handful of sailors and merchants with no manners" and "aristocrats enamored of conventions" (p. 446). The worlds that each side saw as their reference points would appear to have been incommensurable.

So great was the distance between these social worlds that one might well ask if an encounter did in fact take place. Indeed, the question of incommensurability haunts the entire book and is its guiding thread.[1] The very unity of the world in which the encounter occurs seems problematic, given the chasm that separates the historical frameworks in which both sets of actors are operating. In a wonderful chapter devoted to an analysis of temporal relations and the differences between European calendars and the multi-layered "regimes of historicity" of the Malay and Javanese worlds, Bertrand shows that his protagonists live in radically heteronomous universes: "the very texture of time differs in its density and quality" (p. 308), in such a way that the encounter has no real "common place." The study's true subject is less the world of the encounter than the encounter of worlds.

This insight determines the book's method and structure: seeking to explain the encounter's conditions without adopting an overarching point of view, which would necessarily require taking sides, however involuntarily, the historian strives to "navigate" between the two worlds, travelling from one to the other, in order to give each its due share.

Equal Shares of History

The method is close to that of "reciprocal comparison," as Kenneth Pomeranz has defined it,[2] which confers equal dignity to both worlds being considered, free of teleology or ethnocentrism. Bertrand's study makes use of ship logs and European travel narratives, as well as all available accounts from the Malay and the Javanese worlds, viewing them as having the same documentary status, while avoiding anthropological condescension, even when the different sources belong to very different discursive registers. The Malay and Javanese accounts are naturally free of the conventions of dating and description that are familiar to us. Yet the Western texts have their own conventions, which must also be rendered apparent and critiqued. If there is no Banten inhabitant's account of the encounter with the Dutch that is comparable to the travel writing published in Europe, the fact that there is an undeniable documentary asymmetry does not

[1] Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Par-delà l'incommensurabilité : pour une histoire connectée des empires aux temps modernes," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine,* 54-4 bis, 2007 supplement, p. 34-53. On *La Vie des Idées*, see the interview between Anne-Julie Etter, Thomas Grillot, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "History Speaks Many Languages," January 27, 2012 (http://www.booksandideas.net/History-Speaks-Many-Languages.html).
[2] Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence : China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2000. On *La Vie des Idées*, see the review by Éric Monnet, "Le charbon et l'Empire," January 21, 2010.

mean that one should renounce the goal of giving each world its "equal share:" in both instances, one must reconstruct their narrative logic and the source's ideological biases.

Yet one must also refrain from considering the scene of the encounter in binary terms. In presenting these "symmetrical" stories, Bertrand does not neglect the fact the European and Javanese societies are anything but homogeneous. Quite the contrary: inter-European conflicts play a decisive role. The men of the VOC (the Dutch East India Company) competed mercilessly with the Portuguese *Estado da India* in the Indian Ocean. Similarly, competition was rife between the Malay sultanates. This explains the complex alliance-making and jockeying between the various parties. At another level, rivalry and factional struggles between local and transoceanic patronage and kinship networks also played a critical role. For instance, the men from the United Provinces belonged to particular civic communities far more than they did to the Dutch nation, which was still being forged. To describe the encounter as one between broad, undifferentiated entities would be unnecessarily reductive.

The previous insight is crucial, as it irreversibly invalidates any analysis based on the "clash of civilizations" or a conflict of "Islam" and "Christianity", even if the encounter often had a moral dimension in which religious motivations were raised. On the Western side, it was very difficult, in the middle of the Wars of Religion, to rally Catholics and Protestants under the same banner of a missionary crusade, particularly following the Dutch Revolt in the Low Countries and at the very time when the Calvinist United Provinces were struggling against Catholic Spain (and Portugal). On the Malay / Javanese side, pluralism was the norm and the impact of Buddhism remained strong, even if the region had, over the previous decades, been significantly Islamized, albeit very unevenly, through a constant rotation of men and ideas between the Arabic peninsula, South India, and the Malay world, resulting in distinct identities and long-lasting quarrels over mystical interpretations in which the Europeans played absolutely no part. In fact, religious motivations were often exploited for political ends. Bertrand writes: "disguised as martyrs of the Faith, one often finds the victims of military reprisals and commercial intrigue. Confessional allegiance is not the reason for these conflicts, but their vocabulary" (p. 259).

This Javanese encounter, it must be emphasized, did not occur in a vacuum. At the local level, one must not forget the presence of Indian and Chinese merchants. Similarly, the armies confronting one another were anything but homogeneous: among the VOC troops that were defending Jakarta-Batavia in the 1620s, one finds Japanese as well as Swiss and French mercenaries, individuals of mixed race born in the Portuguese trading posts of the Indian subcontinent, Chinese from Macao, and black slaves. The army was, in short, a hybrid. Finally, if one pans out, the Malay world appears as a "global" space: Java is tied, through "long-distance connections," to Imperial China through its merchants, to the Persian world and the Ottoman Empire through its Muslim clerics, and to Gujarat through its sailors and merchants. We find here the same kind of interconnections that have been described by Denys Lombard in his remarkable study of "the Javanese crossroads" (*Le Carrefour javanais*). Bertrand's book therefore demonstrates the heuristic power of connected history, revealing global connections and movement by adjusting its lens and playing on different spatial levels.[3] It also makes it clear that a micro-historical analysis is perfectly compatible with the consideration of circulation over long distances, whatever the skeptics might say:[4] Bertrand offers us a "thick description" (to use Clifford Geertz's term) of the events in Banten, while also analyzing the multiple ways in which the port was tied to the rest of the world.

The Richness of the Passage to India

In bringing us to the passage to India and to Southeast Asia's "Mediterranean Sea," Bertrand's book undertakes a fortuitous decentering. He frees the history of the Euro-Malay encounter from a reductive binary vision, while restoring to the Malay and Javanese worlds both their global character and their historical autonomy. On the one hand, Javanese elites maintained ancient ties to the Arabic peninsula, the Ottoman Empire, and Imperial China, as well as the Persian world and Mughal India. On the other, even after the Europeans' arrival, the Malay world

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[3] Serge Gruzinski, *Les Quatre Parties du monde*, Paris, Seuil, 2006; Romain Bertrand, "Rencontres impériales. L'histoire connectée et les relations euro-asiatiques," *Revue d'Histoire Moderne & Contemporaine,* 54-4 bis, supplement 2007, p. 69-89; Timothy Brook, *Vermeer's Hat: the Seventeenth Century and the Dawn of the Global World*, New York, Bloomsbury Press, 2008. See, too, the recent volumee by Jean-Paul Zuniga (dir.), *Pratiques du transnational*, Paris, CRH-EHESS, 2012.

[4] Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau ("La galaxie histoire-monde ", *Le Débat* 154, March-April 2009, p. 50) completely (perhaps deliberately?) misunderstands Caroline Doukia and Philippe Minard, "Pour un changement d'échelle historiographique," in Laurent Testot (ed.), *Histoire globale. Un autre regard sur le monde*, Auxerre, éditions Sciences Humaines, 2008, p. 161-176.

was not primarily determined by them; their advent was, in reality, simply one event among others.

The resulting effect is one of considerable disorientation, the advantages and heuristic merits of which are obvious, as has been noted, but which also comes at a price. The author's great erudition[5] bombards the reader with vernacular concepts, terminology, and place names that necessitate very attentive reading. The maps and glossary are very useful; a chronology that was not quite so dry would have been welcome. Such are undoubtedly the unavoidable constraints of connected history, that draws on such vast knowledge and worlds that are unfamiliar to a French audience. The author must also be thanked for describing in great detail the Javanese chronicles that we do not have access to. One reservation is that the text at times oscillates between exposition and exegesis, succumbing to the free indirect style, as if the story's seductive quality and the book's own narrative spell had prevailed over analytical caution and critical distance, which the author nevertheless employs to make arguments of elegant subtlety. It is as if from time to time he lets down his guard, abandoning himself to the pleasures of an enthralling narrative. Similarly, his critical presentation of the sources, while efficient and heuristic, often comes later in the book than one might like.

The fact remains that the book opens vast perspectives. In particular, Bertrand offers a superb lesson of applied political anthropology in its analysis of the major Malay treatises on kingship. Rooted in a "deep layer of premises" (p. 347), inherited both from Hindu-Buddhist literatures of the classical age and Malay Islam, these treatises advance a protocolary and highly ritualized conception of royal action, based on the idea of an immobile sovereign expressing his power through ascetic equanimity. The *negara* (the political domain) results from the ordering of nature and society by a gardener-king who appeals to all to continue doing the duty that destiny expects of them.

Here, the author applies his method of "historical symmetry" and of going back and forth between Asia and the West. He first identifies the circulation of the Alexander romance: the

[5] This erudition is attested by the (perhaps excessively) large number of footnotes. We regret that the French translations of some books are omitted: must not editors be encouraged to translate works of social science?

Macedonian emperor appears under the name of "Two-Horned Alexander" and has entered the local imperial mythologies. Yet in these treatises, one notes in particular the possibility of tyrannicide, discussed at the time by Dutch Calvinists and French Monarchomachs, as well as the importance of mystic inspiration and the recourse to astrology as an art of government, which the author compares to European texts that are their exact contemporaries, such as Giordano Bruno (*Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast*) and Jean Bodin (*On the Demonology of the Witches*). These forgotten European texts astonish us because their mixture of mysticism and politics is so exotic: the disorienting effect is arresting. But then it is not the Malay world that astounds us so much as the period—the late sixteenth century, right before the great "anti-mystical turn" of the Catholic West in the 1660s through the 1680s, which seems so foreign to us. Consequently, the exoticism is mostly Western. Yet the commensurability of political models is striking and contrary to our prejudices. The author's approach has, in this way, demonstrated its efficacy.

Bertrand describes this kind of connected history as "historiographic experimentation," which seeks "a joint and parallel thematic exploration" rather than a point-by-point structural comparison between two worlds that have been brought into contact with one another for contingent reasons. The most important thing is that this exploration depends on a situated history of practices, supported by the description and analysis of the actors' own tools. From this perspective, its success is dazzling. It marks a true historiographic turn.

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