

Pearls and Colonial State-Making in the Aru Islands, Southern Maluku (1824 – 1905)

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Abstract

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The historical traces of the Netherlands Indies in engaging with pearl oysters have been overlooked in terms of the state's attitudes toward this specific practice of marine exploitation. Meanwhile, the physical presence of these bivalves in the shallow benthic environment of the eastern coast of the Aru Islands, in Southern Maluku, has hold a unidirectional story of the colonial state-imposed regulations on the far-distant archipelago. Going against this linear progression of events, this thesis aims to disturb the colonial epistemology of pearls and the Aru Islands, one in which a constant fiction was invoked by the state to facilitate violence in the colonial frontier. By close-reading colonial journals, newspapers, and archives against and along the grain, this research indicates that the years 1824 – 1905 reveal a reverberation of coloniality within the archipelago's history. Through the history of Dutch surveyors who came to the Aru Islands, this study shows how fiction and reality collided in the display and (mis)perceptions of power in the archipelago. Reading along the grain of such accounts locates the traces of attitudes or mentalities within the colonial state. This then reveals the contours of ironies at play within colonial state's epistemology.

To unpack these mentalities, this study examines various moments in which colonial fantasies were managed and enacted through the political and economic encounter in the archipelago.

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Introduction

The Aru islands, situated at the fringes of the spice-producing centers, have historically been drawn into wider maritime circuits of extraction. While the region is famous for producing spices such as nutmeg, mace, and cloves, it also offers a diverse range of economic sectors. The Aru Islands are part of the Southern Maluku Islands, which are today administratively incorporated into the *kabupaten* (regencies) of Aru, Tual, Maluku Tenggara, Maluku Barat Daya, and Tanimbar. While not as large or as influential in the annals of Maluku history, the Aru Islands received attention for one of Indonesia's "lesser-known" commodities – pearl oysters.

For most of its history, the Aru Islands have been peripheral to the vision of most Indonesians living in Java's metropolis. As Hans Hägerdal (2019a) suggests, Aru's historical position is one of ambivalence: simultaneously a watery frontier rife with "illicit" trade and a vital site of production for global luxury consumption. The western global market, beginning in the late nineteenth century, has been one of the most important chapters in these historical encounters. Australian historian Steve Mullins (2019) has begun investigating the way the Australian pearling industry expanded to Maluku in the early years of the twentieth century; characterized by its diving equipment and colored laborers, the Australians came and left their presence as one of historiographical importance; recognized as deeply transformative of the maritime world of the Aru Islands.

While such exchanges seemingly occurred over only a few decades, this thesis will show the importance of understanding the underlying themes through which colonial enterprises imagine Aru across long periods of historical encounters. This is especially important within the time period of the Aruese contact with the colonial Netherlands Indies state from 1824 until 1905. One of the

first moves taken by the Netherlands East Indies government during the aforementioned period was the 1893 and 1905 pearling ordinances. The ordinances, published in the state gazette periodical *Staatsblad voor Nederlandsch Indie*, explicitly reordered the Aruese natural seascape for maritime exploitation. The crucial object of this turn-of-the-century event was the pearl oyster; hence, both the 1893 and 1905 legislation were called the *Parelvisscherij Ordonnantie*, or Pearlfishing Ordinance. According to the details provided in the ordinance, pearl oysters were now subject to the direct supervision of the Netherlands Indies and its highest executive position, the Governor General (*Staatsblad voor Nederlandsch Indie*, 1893; 1905). By providing details on the colonial state's maritime territoriality, the eventual size of the oysters, and the type of company eligible to apply for a fishing license, the government became an orchestra of power and order.

The 1893 *Parelvisscherij Ordonnantie* has been called the turning point in Aruese history, as this publication reverberates with the broader wave of colonial state formation across the region. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were understood as a *fin de siècle* of Aru's history. Where the expansion and incorporation of Aru became a way in which the "protagonist" of the story shifted from the Aruese communities to the European colonial managers and company men, eventually passing to the Indonesian state, presenting a totality of control in the history of the islands from 1905 onwards. In particular, this story came to light as the exploitation of pearls took a massive turn when concessions were granted to the Australian-based Celebes Trading Company (CTC), which monopolized the fishing of Aru's pearl banks under a Dutch colonial license until World War II.

The historical events that unfolded in Aru in many ways can be put into conversation with James Scott's (2009) "Zomia," but rather than mainland Southeast Asian highlands, Aru embodies

a maritime counterpart, where power is continually contested through the control of commercial flows and access into the islands' naturally productive zones that breed pearl oysters and other marine resources. It is maritime zomia in the sense that it enables us to situate Aru as an epistemic site where the colonial logic can be traced. The effort to read and serialize this logic along the grain is an important step in acknowledging Aru as a central piece in discussions of control over the environment. While contestation and evasiveness seem to have dominated the discussion around Scott's Zomia, this thesis will complicate this by examining the contours of colonial epistemology in shaping its conception of Aru. In doing so, this thesis will show the complexities of this relationship and does not treat both the colonial state and Aru as subjects that influence each other throughout their long period of interaction.

By examining interactions surrounding knowledge of pearling management, this thesis aims to trace the knowledge employed to control pearls across long cycles of their commodification in Aru and their close entanglement with the logic of colonial state expansion. This thesis will explore Aru not only as a site of extraction but also as an arena of epistemological contestation where differing knowledge systems that governed "management" of naturally productive spaces compete with one another. Such competition will be crucial to understand how material extraction was not simply an economic activity but a mechanism through which power was negotiated, alliances were formed or fractured, and sovereignty was enacted and contested. Therefore, in order to reach such conclusions, I ask two research questions in this study:

- What can pearl as a commodity reveal about the interactions of knowledge between Aruese and non-Aruese actors in the Aru Islands?

- How did pearling become a site of Dutch (mis)perception of power, control, and legitimacy in the Aru Islands?

Centering on the period from 1824 to 1905, this research interrogates how natural resources, especially pearls, became vehicles for negotiating power and sovereignty. Ever since their early interactions with Europeans in the 17th century, the islands' pearls have periodically been pulled into the gravity of Western commercial interests. Yet, concurrently, the islands' ability to maintain an indirect and informal relationship with outside parties recurs. This form of asymmetrical and 'informal' encounters was continued until the end of the nineteenth century, when the rising Netherlands Indies began to project more of its power in the area. For historical context, by 1824, contacts between Aru's head villagers and Dutch colonial officials from their main power base in Ambon or Banda resumed after a 26-year-long relative silence, right after the dissolution of the Dutch trading company, the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC), in 1799.

Additionally, 1824 marked the continuation of treaty- and alliance-making strategies first introduced by the VOC, which carried on well into the early days of the Dutch colonial state. Hans Hägerdal (2009) has previously emphasized the importance of the early modern period (1600-1800) for studying encounters between Western and local actors. It reveals the successes, opportunities, and often assertiveness of local actors against Western dominance, which register differently from those that occurred at a later stage of colonial state consolidation in the early twentieth century. I believe this condition was retained in the dialogue that had taken place in the early nineteenth century. Meanwhile, the choice of 1905 reflects the official start of the CTC concession, which has become an essential tool for consolidating the colonial state's power in the Aru Islands. It clearly reveals the intimate relationship between power and control through the

reordering of ownership in the management of the islands' natural resources. Therefore, the focus on the period 1824 – 1905 serves to crystallize these contesting relations over pearling, thereby transforming the power dynamic between the people of Aru and the Dutch colonial state.

These interactions, preserved in colonial memoirs and public journals, reveal a transition from flexible allegiances during the VOC era to a more rigid colonial idea of subjecthood under the Dutch state. The continuation of treaty-making strategies from Ambon to Aru in the post-1824 period reflects the crucial logic of engagement between Aru and the colonial state. These contacts that managed the relationship between various Aruese villages and the Dutch colonial agents serve as useful modes for understanding how power relations transformed from the asymmetrical dynamics of the VOC into the more direct and patriarchal structures of the Dutch colonial state; the interaction shifted from a more contractual and informal “allegiances” to that of colonial subjects. The latter proved instrumental in securing the Aru Islands concession for CTC. And as this thesis later reveals, this inquiry aims to illuminate the recurring moments of cooperation, resistance, and evasiveness of Aru among its various interacting actors, which were shaped mainly through the commodification of its oysters.

Looking into the process of state-making in Aru, therefore, is not about simplifying it into a binary of metropole versus periphery. Rather, it is about recognizing Aru as a source and site of power where state authority was actively contested and specifically managed. This perspective disrupts the recurring framing of the Netherlands Indies' expansion into the so-called “Outer Islands” as a unilateral imposition from Java—one that often portrays local actors as reactive, disembodied voices doomed to “fail” against the weight of Batavia. When Elsbeth Locher-Scholten (1994) asks whether the Dutch colonial state's imperial expansion was driven by

decisions made in Holland or Batavia, I would argue that it was neither fully centralized nor detached. Instead, it was a crafted colonial imagination emerging from the peripheral vision of the metropolitan area. This is not to suggest that imperialism was simply a phenomenon of being “pulled into the periphery,” but rather a logic that creates opacity, creating a liminal space where the metropole had to be continually invoked to affirm authority. In this sense, expansion did not begin from the center, but through a trans-local colonial condition—reproducing the metropole’s imagined power through acts of performative power projection.

Note on Sources

To conduct this research, the thesis will use several sources to highlight how an appropriate approach can be utilized. Firstly, I would like to establish that most of my sources are published colonial reports, mostly from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. This comes in the form of travelogues such as colonial officer Adrianus Bik’s journey to the Aru Islands in 1824, D.H. Kolff’s in 1825, Assistant Resident Bosscher in 1854, Governor General A.J. Duymaer in 1855, colonial officer H.C. van Eijbergen in 1862, von Rosenberg in 1865, P.C. L. Hartog in 1875, and Resident Baron van Hovevell in 1889, as well as Alfred Russel Wallace’s journey through the islands in the 1850s. Several of these sources would overlap in their reporting style. For example, many details written by Adrianus Bik were rewritten for the Governor General’s book *van der Cappelen*, published that same year. Therefore, when approaching these sources, it is imperative to take a step back regarding the authenticity of some first-hand accounts.

Nevertheless, these colonial ethnographic encounters capture essential firsthand accounts by Dutch colonial managers as they catalog their own understanding of Aruese geography and worldview. Their accounts, when read closely, enable me to complicate the colonial epistemology

of Aru, going against the crafting of historical facts used to reaffirm the colonial imagination. Aside from the need to revise the methodology for reading these encounters, several practices in precolonial Aruese pearling can be revealed by closely examining the details and explanations of some of these encounters. These details can sometimes be overlooked when read simply as trivial information, rather than critically. It again underscores the importance of acknowledging the details provided by colonial sources while remaining critical of them. It is informational as it produced the colonial logic surrounding pearling.

These sources, which range from 1824 to 1890s, capture how these interactions were carried out from the time of the VOC in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They will capture the interactions of Dutch colonial and Aruese worldviews regarding pearling in the islands. Too much reliance on these first-hand accounts can also have their own weaknesses; however, it creates a distinct understanding of Aru but lacks the larger, underlying, unspoken logic of coloniality outside the immediate encounters. These encounters often can present themselves as quite detached from the wider regional or global phenomena. It is then important to turn to other published secondary sources.

This thesis will then be supported by several other secondary published sources, namely popular magazines that rely on first-hand accounts of events. These magazines were targeted for public consumption, such as the various magazines (*Tijdschrift*) from the military, such as the marine or navy (*Marine Blad* and *Zeemagt*), the Government's Almanac (*Regerings Amanaak*), or the Government's Gazettes and their Supplementary (*Stasblad* and *Bijblad*), and various public newspapers. Within these sources, they also include important accounts that offer multiple perspectives on the colonial apparatus at work. Different published sources reveal how the colonial

state operated and how it came to understand Aru. This will enrich the story's complexity and provide deeper nuances at play in encounters in Aru.

Thirdly, other secondary sources, equally important, will be newspapers published during the period. These mostly Java-based newspapers are a treasure trove of details and present a more public-centered, colonial understanding of Aru, which can shade into a different register than that of official colonial agents dispatched to observe Aruese life. In this regard, the public newspaper can be understood to have the strength of showing the colonial mentality. These deeply emotional registers of colonial society reveal another layer of how colonial logic operates beyond the immediacy of what we can call the direct bureaucratic system. While imbricated in colonial state-making, the processes governing the publication of such newspapers took a more varied approach and even provided ample space for critique of the system in power.

The decision to select and use these varied sources comes down to two reasons. Firstly, the limited time I have has barred me from conducting extensive research in the national archives in Jakarta, Indonesia. The two-year master's program can be completed effectively by using materials readily available at the university or online. Yet the available materials themselves affected my second reasoning when choosing these sources; they are often overlooked in research about Aru. This is central to my second reasoning: the processes that had taken place in the 1820s-1890s were sometimes overshadowed by the entry of the Australian Celebes Trading Company in 1905. But the logic that "opens" and makes Aru available to be exploited is not extensively discussed. There is a tendency to accept these as predetermined conditions arising from the natural movement of the colonial state. Whereas in this thesis, I will show that this logic and by extension, its reality

was created through colonial encounters with the Aruese. It will try to retrace the logic that makes the fiction real; that Aru was ultimately meant to be an object of environmental exploitation.

That said, my focus in employing these sources is to understand how mentalities work in different ways and across different registers. Within these sources, I am looking at the creation of language in which knowledge was produced. My project thus employs a close reading of the source and questions about how language is employed within it. By understanding the language and structures, we can begin to grasp the underlying mentality and, eventually, the rationale prescribed in these textual documents. I am not concerned with the voices of the subaltern, but rather with revealing the mechanisms of silence in the historical sources. The sovereign governor general and the colonial state are not all-knowing, one-dimensional entities, but rather pulsate with partiality and confusion while simultaneously creating the illusion of monolithic characteristics. A reading along the grain of its own logic is to ultimately read the mentalities of the state.

Research Methodology

I should explain in detail how the position of these historical interactions needs critical evaluation and how it is affected by the methodology that this thesis uses. Looking into pearling goes beyond discussing the prominent themes of coastal and maritime history as stand-alone scholarship. Rather, it serves as a gateway to interdisciplinary studies of colonial knowledge production. Therefore, to further complement this interdisciplinary approach towards reconstructing Aru's pearling banks as a site of state-making, I will employ two interconnected methodologies – one revealing the logic of colonial knowledge production within the sources and the other tracing the commodification of pearls. Engaging with both themes pushes this thesis not only to locate the pulse of imperial formations but also to problematize the very inscription of these formations by

examining how pearls have placed the Aru Islands according to the specific “surface orientation” (Taylor, 1998). Within this part, I will discuss them thoroughly in the next two sections.

Reading The Mentalities of The Colonial State

Acknowledging the limited sources on Aruese history led me to examine these materials critically. This inward reflection seeks to move beyond colonial narratives. Since most records are colonial publications, I propose reading them “along the grain” (Stoler, 2010) to trace how colonial logic was produced. Building on Ann Laura Stoler’s idea of “colonial anxiety,” this thesis will show that colonial sources are not static repositories of facts, but dynamic texts shaped by the anxieties and ambitions of state formation. These documents do more than record events—they embody the uncertainties of an imperial world in flux, where administrators struggled to align bureaucracy with changing realities. Such records show the partial nature of colonial knowledge and the state’s attempts to control and integrate elusive subjects within imperial governance.

In this context, record-keeping becomes a lens to interrogate the contradictions of colonial power. These sources were not mere accounts of the past. They were tools used by colonial administrators to impose order on an unstable system. Viewing this through Trouillot’s (1995) concept of “silencing,” we can examine how colonial systems pinned certainty on uncertainty. This prompts us to ask what has been left unsaid or unspoken within the sources. By critically examining these documented interactions, our lens reveals how the power relationships between the Aruese and the colonial state dissect the colonial state's anxiety to subdue, pacify, and displace the Aruese to maintain its way of life.

To train our reading practices to engage with these realities and go "beyond the state," we must critically examine the structures governing this anxiety. We should examine the colonial state's mentality in the source through a microhistorical lens. By "microhistory," I mean not an isolated event but a way of reading sources between the lines. It is also important to recognize that micro and macro events are not binary opposites but moieties that need these oppositional qualities to exist. Further, I propose putting microhistory in conversation with what Keith Taylor (1998) describes as the "Surface Orientation" of history, thereby illuminating historical methods. This "Surface Orientation" (Taylor, 1998) suggests understanding history through "the surface of fluid experience in time and terrain, which softens and fables the coherencies of historicized regions and nations" (Taylor, 1998). In many ways, Keith Taylor urges us to look beyond large, voyeuristic concepts and focus instead on the specific cultural and material contexts of history, thereby disrupting the process by which large state-driven concepts "capture" or "rescue" history (Duara, 1995).

What would it mean to examine events in the source through microhistory? To explain this, I draw on Cooper and Stoler's (1997) concept of imperial history and the term "History of Mentalities." When examining the sources, it is important to interpret the ideas they present not as fixed facts, but as ones that "take shape gradually and develop in a specific context" (Hutton, 1981). While the history of mentalities has emphasized popular culture, or "the structure of the mind of everyman" (Hutton, 1981), I argue that mentality also illuminates the process of colonial state-making. This approach examines how the regulation of mental activity is reflected in the linguistic register produced by these sources, mapping the colonial state's navigation of its own subjectivities. Following Cooper and Stoler's (1997) call, we must direct critical thinking not only to the products of the colonial state—the colonized—but also to the subjectivity of the colonizers.

Reading these sources as ethnographic encounters with the state allows us to sense the otherwise overlooked emotional registers within them. A microhistorical reading thus clarifies how hierarchical power relations were constructed and reinforced through the logic of colonial knowledge production.

I believe the various situated circumstances merit further examination by historians. As Carlo Ginzburg (1993) puts it, “No human eye will ever succeed in catching at once, ... the historical specificity (real or presumed) of a battle and its cosmic irrelevance” (Ginzburg, 1993). This abstract imagination of historical events can only be presented at specific moments to paint a fuller picture. It thus gives an impetus to take a closer look, which “permits us to grasp what eludes a comprehensive viewing” (Ginzburg, 1993). This elusiveness of comprehensive viewing can thus be understood as a way in which microhistory can be utilized to move away from essentializing and deterministic reduction. By looking at the seismic levels of events, the need to feel, listen, and look at things as granular and fragmentary becomes a way to challenge the manic serializing that is detached from the specific surface orientation (Taylor, 1988) of the archive’s production.

Eventually, through this dissection of colonial mentalities, I will recollect the moments of dialogue between Aru and the colonial state, forming a critique and a reading of resistance against the desire for a one-dimensional history. As Keith Taylor (1998) argues, history is best seen as episodic rather than linear and continuous, grounded in the specific situatedness of those historical experiences. It needs to be scattered and rendered away from binary subjectivities. Thus, in approaching the historicized past of the Aru Islands as one of complex encounters, the long and undulating nineteenth century becomes not a story of the inevitable success of the colonial state, but rather a site of multiple imaginations and forgotten realities fostered by the Aruese.

Oceanic History and Pearl Commodification in Aru

The pearls themselves, along with the conditions surrounding their extraction and circulation, offer insight into the oceanic landscape that influenced the Aruese way of life. Recalling Peter Lape's critique (2004), the specific topography of Aru resists the pervasive metaphor of islands as isolated spaces. Celia Lowe (2013), in her book *Wild Profusion*, further examines this fluidity by exploring the notions of “nature” and “science” in the maritime setting of Togean Island, Sulawesi. The complex fluidity that characterizes maritime-oriented island societies is grounded in the multiple and sedimentary concept that emerges as “Wild Profusion” (Lowe, 2013), which complements the Aruese archipelago as a site of such fluidity. Another particularly useful concept to complement this is Steinberg's (2001) notion of the ocean as a space that is never entirely calm or blank. Therefore, to read Aruese history is to look at the ocean not as a blank surface but a layered, three-dimensional location where life is sustained beneath the visible surface.

Oceanic histories help explain how pearls reveal Aruese history. In *Oceanic Histories* (2018), Armitage, Bashford, and Sivasundaram present watery spaces as crucial for imagination, governance, and material exchange (Armitage *et al.*, 2018). Rather than confusion, this entanglement shows how watery spaces revise traditional views of history by highlighting interrelationships, especially in the co-constitution of the human and non-human (Armitage *et al.*, 2018).

To explore the oceanic history of pearls, I propose examining the pearl oysters of Aru themselves as historical subjects. This means examining how pearl oysters carry histories of Aru: as objects with spirits of their own. To concretely understand the role of pearls as a thing with its own spirit, I will be looking at pearls as an object of this study with the assistance of several

Anthropological theories. Mostly, I am looking at pearls through the “methodological fetishism” elaborated both by Appadurai (1986) and Peter Pels (1998), to understand the “spirit of things” of Aruese pearls. As Peter Pels (1998) suggests, by looking into the discourse of fetish, they thereby admit the existence of objects that disrupt everyday valuations that enable humans to control their meaning and value. Thus, to understand the spirit of pearls is to affirm that humans and pearls have mutual influence. In the words of Pels (1998), “we cannot only think animistically, of anthropomorphized objects, of a spirit *in* matter, but also fetishistically, of human beings objectified by the spirit *of* the matters they encounter”.

Thus, to follow the fetishization of commodities is not to displace human encounters with the object, but to acknowledge the influence of matter on humans and *vice versa*. As Appadurai (1986) argues, the difficulty lies in moving away from excessive dualism, “us and them,” “objectification of persons, versus personification of things. Instead, one does not have to affirm the transcendence of the materiality of things by human intentionality (Pels, 1998). Thus, to move in, rather than to escape, the sensuous border zone between us and the things around us is to accept that neither humans nor objects possess a predetermined primacy (Pels, 1998). Therefore, rare materials like pearls embedded with spirits are moving with and simultaneously beyond monetary-based objects. They act as commodities that involve an exchange of desire and fantasy. Their rarity and opacity make them ideal objects through which imperial regimes could project certainty, while paradoxically revealing the limits of their control. Pearls, in this sense, are epistemological agents: things that are both based on colonial structures and, at the same time, undo colonial knowledge, serving as nodes where materiality, value, and state-making converge. It is within this definition that pearls are the spirit that functions both to identify the colonial logic, which helps form its ontology, and to enable it to push its narratives beyond the colonial state.

In order to look at the spirit of things of pearls, it is then important to employ a close reading of how pearls came up in historical sources. Travelogue, popular journal, magazines, and newspapers, all – knowingly or unknowingly – become scribes exercising their own understanding of the lifeworld of pearls. This methodology emphasizes an understanding of how its iteration in the source conveys a physical and cultural story of pearls. This can then be read to examine the imagination, the “objectification of persons,” and, potentially, the state through the lens of pearls. This close entanglement can then become a crucial point surrounding the imbrication of pearls as a center of history, held close by colonial violence and imperialism, which supports the oyster’s global distribution (Tamara, 2020). Pearl oysters are not a standalone product of a stable and predictable “natural world”, but one that has its spirit and its value generated through its intersection with various human actors; this helps to read the “submerged” histories of Aru. Histories where an alternative epistemology is being carried out within Aru’s oceanic life.

Thus, when Ostroff (2020) asked “Can the Oyster Speak?”, he highlighted the importance of understanding how the history of pearls as non-human actors is sometimes overlooked. By reading the iteration of pearls' history within fetishization and commodification, my thesis will attempt to trace the inseparable way in which pearls have a “lifeworld” that affects human actors, interacts with them, and shapes their understanding of them. In the vein of what Timothy Mitchell (2002) has done with mosquitoes in Egypt, this methodology will follow the traces of pearls not to objectively recount the history of non-human actors, but to see the pearls as “social agents” that disturb and reveal the unstable colonial understanding of pearls. Looking at Aru’s pearls as “social agents” –commodities with spirits –within oceanic history, will place Aru as a site in which “artificial efforts to demarcate and define them ... only writ in water” (Armitage *et al*, 2018). This means that, as Azoulay argues in *Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), viewing these imperial-origin

efforts to control, in this case, pearls, as acknowledging the exercise of colonial violence that shuts out one historical reality in favor of another (Azoulay, 2019).

Notes on Terminologies About Aru Islands

To clarify what this thesis means by the term “Aru,” I must first explain my own positionality when using it. I aim to dissect and clarify how “Aru” can be used responsibly—without reducing it to simplistic notions or rendering it a normative reality taken for granted in my thesis. As I argue, even using the term “Aru” to designate the archipelago highlights the violent politics that shaped its etymology.

When viewing Aru solely as a geographical space, we would also see significant differences from other regions of the Indonesian archipelago, such as Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi. The space which Aru occupies topographically resembles that of southern New Guinea and northern Australia. It was once part of the Sahul landmass, which connected the Australian and Papuan landmasses (Hope & Aplin, 1995). The result of this unique geographical position was recognized by the British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace during his sojourn on the island in the 1850s. Birds-of-Paradise, the crown jewel of Aru’s biodiversity, pushed the naturalist to help postulate the theory of evolution. The islands’ differing geographical trajectories postulate a greater need to investigate the space that made Aru unique and, at other times, “strange” and “peculiar”. This identity will thus further strengthen the islands as a site that escapes simplistic appropriation.

To further dislodge the one-dimensional image of village settlement in Aru, we must be critical when using certain terms, so as not to nullify the internally bifurcated relationships within

settlements across the archipelago. Village settlements have historically been understood in binary terms: *Depan Tanah* (lit. Front Land) for the villages that settle mostly in the western portion of the islands and *Belakang Tanah*, which sits mostly at the islands' eastern shores (lit. Back Land)—a division that has since reverberated the Dutch colonial terms of *Voorwal* (Frontshore) and *Achterwal* (Backshore). These terms eventually became entangled with politicized concepts of the later Indonesian developmentalist state—*Kemajuan* (Progress), *Pembangunan* (Development) —and contrasted with *Tertinggal* (Left Behind) and *Terbelakang* (Backward). While the Malay-Dutch-English term and its historical significance will be used thoroughly later in this thesis, I will clarify that I have chosen to retain the use of Frontshore and Backshore, mainly borrowing its use from Patricia Spyer's *The Memory of Trade* (2000).

Amidst the lack of a body of works that is centrally dedicated to explaining Aru as the center stage of its own narration, these terms were not used by anthropologist Patricia Spyer to indicate the narratives that engendered the different cultures between Aruese villages, but rather to refocus attention to Aruese “runaway topographies” (Spyer, 2000). Runaway topographies, in her work, are an attempt to reclaim the implicitly dichotomizing original meaning of the term, and to further diminish the various attempts employed by the state for project total control, as nothing short of intermittent and uneven – a topography of flight, runaways, and ultimately, evasiveness. By understanding through this lens, this thesis will use the terms Frontshore and Backshore within such a framework. Every time these terms are mentioned and used, they will begin to evoke the slippery and sliding nature of Aruese interactions with the controlling mechanisms of the colonial state. By using these terms with such specificity, I do not aim to create a bias toward Aru as single and thus present an unseen integration that will only rupture as I introduce Frontshore and Backshore as recurring terms. Thus, this usage will only further reshape “Aru” as a term that

enables us to see Aruese lifeworlds as perpetually transformative, full of motions and as capable of negotiating their positions, even within structures that were not of their own making.

Considering all these notes, I want to emphasize that when invoking the “Aru Islands” as a space, I am looking into Aru as a historical reality with its specific ‘Surface Orientation’ that lives and pulses within the historical sources that I am working to reconstruct its history. Whenever I conjure the term “Aru Islands”, I am not invoking the surface orientation that it currently sits in as I am writing my thesis, nor does it invoke a simplistic one dimensional tone of its past that renders the archipelago as a flattened continuous landmass, but rather “Aru” as a reality that existed within the sources, one that is inherently complex with varying degrees of imbrication and bifurcation formed by its interactions with multiple operating languages – the language of economy, cultural, religious, politics, and violence – that had left an impression in its existence within the annals of colonial sources. Aru, therefore, sits within this thesis not as a simplification of complex entanglement but as a force to dislodge the widely accepted epistemology that will inadvertently recall simplistic notions carried out throughout colonial epistemic practices.

I am not here to “open” Aru’s voice for mere academic consumption and appropriation. Instead, I seek to “listen closely” to the silences it ascribes to it through the technology of historiography. I want to let the silence speak for itself when “Aru” was inscribed in codified languages in the firsthand accounts of colonial managers. Put simply, I read historical sources and recognize my biases by actively listening to what Aru says in these granular moments of silencing. As Laurie Sears puts it, “the subaltern is always speaking. The problem and challenge for postcolonial intellectuals – whether they have inherited their subject position of colonizer or that of the colonized – is how to listen when the subaltern speaks” (Sears, 1996).

Structure of Thesis

To create a cohesive argument, this thesis is divided into two chapters. The first chapter, titled “Following the Oyster’s Path”, will focus on the material history of the pearls in Aru. By tracing the history of pearls in Aru, this thesis will examine the aftereffects of the material as a tool for understanding the formation of pearl resource management. As these ideas emerged through interactions with the material, this chapter will discuss how different actors interacted with and produced their own versions of what Aruese pearls represented in their lifeworlds. Thus, this chapter reveals the “situatedness” of pearling management, shaped by the Aruese landscape. Predominantly encapsulated in the trade of oysters, this chapter will explore the complex layers that entangle Aru’s pearl trade with its social world. Ranging from the interactions between humans and natural spaces, between different Aru villages, between foreign traders and Aru communities, and ultimately between Aru and the Netherlands Indies.

This chapter will be divided into three sub-sections. The first sub-section, “Pearls as Objects in Unstable Space,” will examine how, as things-in-motion and commodities, pearls laid the foundations for understanding their itineraries. Employing this understanding will put forth how the materiality of pearls affected Aru and its surroundings by recognizing their autonomy as having embedded life rather than static, both physically and metaphorically, objects intended only as projected, fetishized commodities. Understanding the ways pearls were never apart and mutually constituted the social life in Aru serves as a foundational tool for examining the recurring moments in which pearls negotiated their presence with human actors through their own itineraries. This negotiated-ness will then be seen in two iterations: the first is “Encountering the Wealth of Aru”. This sub-chapter will look at several colonial sources in recording the interactions of Aru with the

pearls – and by extension, its sea habitat. Arising from this interaction, we can see how pearls and the environments in which they sit become sites of place-making and an inward gaze for the Aruese. Continuing along similar lines, the next sub-section, “Pearls-In-Motion and the Reordering of Aru Space,” will examine how the colonial regime of “productivity” reorders the ecological space of Aru and turns the pearling banks into a threatening space, legible only for control by the ever-consolidating Netherlands Indies.

Meanwhile, the second chapter, “Aru as a Stage of Power Performance,” redirects this thesis to the employment of *besluiten*. It examines moments when the Dutch colonial state exercised power to control and render its topography legible. By tracing the paper trails through which the colonial state negotiated control in Aru, the chapter explores imperial knowledge as a language of power. This approach reveals how processes silenced or buried Aruese realities embedded in pearling management. The chapter also examines key moments that crystallized these *besluiten*, particularly the 1893 *Parelvisscherij Ordonnantie* (Pearl-Fishing Ordinance) and its 1905 revision. Through this analysis, we see the Pearling Ordinance as the “main script” for the prominent performance of imperial governance. It sets the stage for colonial imaginations of Aru as a productive, legible, and “mapped” (Thongchai, 1994) part of the imperial littoral zone.

The second chapter will also be divided into three sub-sections. The first of such sub-sections, “Imagining the Metropole from Aru,” will set the stage for how the earliest iteration of colonial knowledge production on Aru stems from imperial agents who invoked authority to guide their understanding. It will employ a close reading of the written account by Dutch surveyors sent to establish colonial authority in Aru at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The second sub-section, “Shattering *Zaman Belanda*,” examines the 1880s-1890s anti-colonial, anti-commercial

movement that swept across Aru as a moment of shattering the image of *Zaman Belanda* (the Dutch colonization period), *highlighting the instability* of colonial power projection. The third and final sub-section. “Aru Mapped: *Potret Orang-Orang Kalah*” by reading into the Pearling Ordinance of 1893 and the subsequent concession of CTC in 1905 as the laboratory of state machinations turning Aru into a legible unit of the state. This third and final sub-chapter will focus on the 1893 ordinance, which establishes a conceptual framework for the Aru Islands and Aruese to facilitate their incorporation into the colonial state. This will focus on the exploration of how the legal conceptualization of Aru becomes a core aspect of how Aru was and still is portrayed as “*Orang-Orang Kalah*” or the defeated people.

This idea of defeat and victimhood serves to promote and legitimize violent actions against the islands. I would like to emphasize that both of the above-mentioned chapters will not be structured as a standalone discussion, but rather as a window for continuation in displacing the colonial imagination of power in Aru. Therefore, there might be certain overlapping mentions between places, periods, and phenomena from these two chapters. This mode of writing escapes the need to create a chronologically ordered discussion, which has its shortcomings, by recounting events diachronically. Although this is especially important for historical research, I believe the diachronic style of writing could inevitably lead the discussion to a predetermined temporal point and speak of the “finality” of the past. The framing of this paper will not reject this style but will see Aru's evasiveness as a historical site that permeates the continuing multiplicity. Ultimately, the subject-based approach of this thesis will facilitate a narrative for a possible decolonial approach for future endeavors in Aru or Maluku studies.

Chapter I

Following the Oyster's Path

I. Pearls as Objects in Unstable Spaces



IMAGE 1. PEOPLE WORKING ON SHORE WITH THE DUTCH MAIL STEAMER IN THE BACKGROUND, DOBO HARBOUR, WARMAR ISLAND, 1908. SOUTHERN FAMILY PHOTOGRAPHER. (N.D.). COLLECTION OF THE STATE LIBRARY OF QUEENSLAND

Within the sandy avenues that made indistinguishable borders on the streets, there is a story of the main port town of Dobo, the Aru Islands. This is a story that one of the most well-known written records of the social life of Dobo at that point in time, the colonial newspaper *De Nieuwe Courant*, had published under the title “Koloniale Tijdschrift” or Colonial Periodicals, featuring a review of the experiences of one of its colonial bureaucratic managers stationed there, A.H.G. van Sluys. It was what van Sluys described as a momentous step in his government career; he used the

term “Dobo-Ervaringen” (Dobo Experiences; “De Nieuwe Courant”, 1916). Van Sluys described his experience as “nagenoeg onmogelijke leven op een uithoeks buitenpost”, or “an almost impossible life on a remote outpost” (“De Nieuwe Courant”, 1916). In what can best be described as an unstable space – borrowing this term from Patricia Spyer (1998)- Dobo became a place where contrasting colonial terrains came alive. Where contradiction became the norm in which the colonial state functions. This terrain comes with an interesting description of Dobo, as one newspaper describes:

“Since the government leased the rights to fish for the pearl oysters, the small nest attracted a multitude of adventurers from Australia, Japan, Manila, and all the places of our archipelago, who were there encamped in light-and-dense houses and shacks, accompanied by the inevitable incoming of the Japanese public women from East Asia”. (“De Nieuwe Courant”, 1916).

In a similar vein to what Alfred Wallace (2008 [1869]) depicted during the naturalist’s sojourn into Aru in the 1850s in part of his journey across the islands of the modern Indonesian archipelago, he too colorfully described the animated-ness of Aru. During his stay in February 1857, he wrote:

“...there are now near five hundred people in Dobbo of various races, all met in this remote corner of the East, as they express it, ‘to look for their fortune;’ ... they are most of them people who have the very worst reputation for honesty, as well as half-caste Javanese, with a sprinkling of half-wild Papuans from Timor, Babber, and other islands. This motley, ignorant, bloodthirsty, thievish population live here without the shadow of a government, with no police, no courts, and no lawyers; yet they do not cut each other’s throats, do not plunder each other day and night, do not fall into the anarchy such a state of things might be supposed to lead to. It is very extraordinary.” (Wallac, 2008 [1869]).

Both stories, unknowingly (or perhaps knowingly), retained a gaze that produced Dobo as a “wild” and “rapacious” space, naturally animated by the encounters with materials traded there. Existing within this gaze was an assumption that the temporality of Dobo – and by extension Aru – was seemingly suspended. This suspension-animation cycle, which emerged within the predication of specific material encounters, opens an interesting perspective on Aru as existing

within colonial epistemology. While the descriptions refer to the conditions that accompanied Dobo's economic transformation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they subtly convey a sense of contrasting colonial modernity in the periphery. In an almost heterotopic manner, both accounts painted a colonial picture of Aru as a "frontier town" that functions unstably at the edge of the colonial state and the wider Asian world. Yet this chaotic and unstable nature comes not from direct external excursions slipping out of the colonial state's grasp. On the contrary, Van Sluys and Wallace's depiction of Dobo emerged from a material encounter that operates invisibly, akin to a pendulum – performing motions of stability within certain boundaries and limits.

In the case of Van Sluys, this containment was the Australian employers, who, in their massive wealth from pearl extraction, threatened to freeze their employees' wages to curb violence in the town (*Gympie Times and Mary River Mining Gazette*, 1910). Meanwhile, for Wallace, the boundaries are even more mysterious, as he clearly reflects the idealization of capitalism and its invisible hand of control, marked profusely by a perception of peace and control brought by the pearl trade. Thus, as these traces of distant and separate encounters of material circulation in Dobo show, the archipelago existed and performed specifically with a sense of functionally unstable space. Both accounts of transformation by the burgeoning trade and the colonial state, respectively, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, record and depict Aru within the larger colonial order of things. Therefore, to critically examine colonial narratives about Aru, it is important to examine the state's encounters with the pearl oysters.

Celia Lowe (2013) has used the case of biodiversity in the Eastern Indonesian island of Togean to understand this profusion of "nature" as multiple epistemic interactions. Moving nonlinearly,

these interactions foregrounded the idea that various discourses seek to see “nature” as an eruption from differing angles and paths. Following this line of thought, this chapter will trace the colonial mind by examining the processes by which pearls were reordered. Especially within the documented historical encounters produced by the state’s imperial administrators. The series of encounters between imperial agents on Aru was key in mapping their experience as the basis for the colonial state’s logic on pearl oysters. It comes as no surprise that such an act of legibility-creation serves to meet their need to find an ontological place for Aru within the wider tapestry of the Netherlands Indies.

Yet the story of colonial “ordering of things” is far more complex and nuanced than the colonial state portrayed it. Ethnographic encounters, colonial public magazines, and newspapers all refer to the underlying insecurity of this logical proBorrowing the term “unstable spaces” from Patricia Spyer (1998). I use this particular term to understand Aru not merely as one unit within the larger colonial state, but as a site of contact zone (Hagerdal, 2019b), where meaning and authority were always in constant flux – a site in which the projected falls short of expectation. But by exploring this framework more deeply, an analysis of “unstable spaces” must also be conducted through the colonial lens of power. Here, I acknowledge what Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) has termed “the moment of fact assembly” (i.e., the moment an archive or source was created) as a guide for reading the story of Aru in the colonial mind. When looking at moments when Aru was made legible by colonial documents, it performed in a certain manner that adhered to colonial logic. This

logic was therefore to always cast the “unstable space” as something that occurs to keep the colonial epistemic and physical violence permitted.

These multiple entanglements also seek to understand pearl oysters as a product of encounters with colonial ideas of productivity and governance. Thus, the question brought by Ostroff (2020), “Can the oyster speak?” is then brought forth again within this chapter. Through close reading of these sources, this chapter will discuss how the relational entanglement between pearls as a commodity and the islands’ historical formation complicates the story of the state’s unidirectional control over the pearls. Here, the idea of commodification helps us view such entanglements as non-straightforward, moving in different directions, rather than a one-directional move that automatically turns ‘goods’ into ‘commodities’ (van Binsbergen, 2013). By examining the commodification of pearls, this chapter will show the deep interface that pearls served in mediating power relations within the island. This will be made clear through the tension between control and the circulation of pearls, which reveals differing responses to the pearl economy between the Aruese and the Dutch colonial state. Controlling access to pearls thus becomes a site of tension in which pearls, as “things-in-motion,” encounter differing and often competing epistemologies and logics of productivity. This will also invite a broader discussion of how to disturb “productivity” as a colonial regime of value—a regime that seemingly sought to dislocate pearls from their ecological and social embeddedness and re-situate them within the extractive logics of colonial governance.

To further illustrate how the commodification of pearls might disturb such colonial moments, I am borrowing Appadurai’s “methodological fetishism” as a methodology (Appadurai, 1986). Appadurai’s approach to commodification helps us recognize how the meanings of pearls can cross

and be transferred, thereby affecting the colonial state's sense of self. Within this light, pearls are not a mere passive object that was ascribed in value by outside factors, but as an agent that mediates encounters in Aru's waters – turning the archipelago into a “sticky surface” of relations shaped by human and non-human interactions. Therefore, it is also equally important to situate the pearls through the lens of Peter Pels' “Spirit of Matter” (1998). Pel's piece can equip us to understand how the material objects themselves are entities that exert agency. Not just as a simple reflection of human desire, but as forces that influence and objectify humans themselves. This framework resonates with Kopytoff's (1986) “Biography of Things”, which reads commodities as something that was brought by specific cultural and cognitive processes.

Such specific processes pertain to what historian Rohan Deb Roy (2015) has termed “nonhuman agency” in history. While this thesis, in many ways, treats human-nonhuman interactions as a crucial part of the imperial state-making process, it is ultimately within the interest of this research to treat the pearls as embodying agency without reducing them to a one-dimensional understanding. Or in the words of Roy, it is an attempt to “deconstruct the constellation of material and social interface that produced them as agents and subaltern subjects at specific moments in history” (Roy, 2015). Here, echoing Timothy Mitchell's (2002) article “Can the Mosquito Speak?”, this chapter will examine pearls through material encounters recorded in colonial sources. Tracing these encounters will provide a new understanding which acknowledges that human agency and by extension, the anthropocentric concept of power, is something that has the possibility to be disturbed (Mitchell, 2002). Therefore, as Zeb Tortorici and Martha Few (2013) note on writing animal histories, writing nonhuman histories is often not to “speak for” the nonhuman, but to look at them as having social agents within the flow of human histories. In this sense, looking at pearls as commodities serves to thwart any dominant regime of value that had

governed them in a way that imposes “rigid regulations” that seek “to create its own closed-off, limited universe” (Appadurai, 1986)

Ultimately, by looking at pearls’ nonhuman history through the traces of commodification, it serves to create Aru itself the center of epistemology. Becoming a terrain where various ways, the state has employed its apparatus for controlling the pearls, progressive characteristics. Simultaneously, by tracing the pearls within the sources, this chapter will show how Aruese have been able to exist within the colonial regime of power. Within this oscillation, pearls did not become disembodied abstractions removed from their environs but rather retained their influence, co-constructing the material and political space of Aru.



IMAGE 2. A WARWAREHOUSE FILLED WITH MOTHER-OF-PEARLS IN DOBO, OF POELAU WAMAR, AN ISLAND OF ARU, CIRCA 1935. COLLECTION OF KITLV, [HTTP://HDL.HANDLE.NET/1887.1/ITEM:818628](http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:818628)

II. Encountering The Wealth of Aru

During his stay in June 1857, in which his stay at one of the traders house, Wallace was intermittently interrupted by the visitations of traders bringing with them natural products of

trepang (sea cucumber), mother-of-pearl shells, dried shark's fins, as well as birds of paradise, that they had offered to be traded for other items – knives, tobacco, sago, or handkerchiefs (Wallace, 2008 [1869]). In some of these interactions, one can see how pearl oysters circulate erratically. During the negotiation, the different values held by Wallace and the traders did not align, and thus, no exchange occurred. Within that interchange, the oysters slip back as objects of little to no interest for an exchange to occur. Wallace even noted that roaming pirates would plunder every other article of their captured ship, except for the mother-of-pearl shells, owing to their bulky sizes (Wallace, 2008 [1869]). This slippery and unstable nature of pearl shells then begs the question of how these encounters affect the colonial conception of the oysters.

As Philip Steinberg (2001) argues, the ocean cannot be understood as a blank space, but as a political terrain that resists enclosure and smooth governance. This was especially true in 1890, when the Assistant-Resident of Amboina Residency, Baron van Hoëvell, saw that the only “richness” for Aru lay within the surrounding reefs of their archipelago. Thus, when projecting the ocean in three dimensions, with various points of depth within the ocean floor, one must take into account how the “wealth of Aru” interacts between the actions of human actors and pearls in the environment in which it is constituted. This then pushes the importance of discerning the biological reality that constitutes the pearls. The term “pearl oysters” has been used to apply to bivalves of the *Pinctada* genus (Katsuhiko and Tëmkin, 2008), and by looking at the physicality of the oysters, there are two types of oysters prevalent in the larger Indian and Pacific Oceans area. Those that

grew well within the environment of tropical and subtropical waters are *Pinctada maxima*, or silver-lip pearl oyster, and *Pinctada margaritifera*, or Black-lip pearl oyster (Yukihira et al, 2006).

The *P. Maxima* lived in various ecosystems, ranging from shallow seagrass beds to deep-sea reefs, within the turbid, sediment-rich waters of the tropical and subtropical continental shelf regions (Gervis and Sims, 1992; Katsuhiko and Tëmkin, 2008). This habitat is a crucial determinant for oysters, as one of its famous products, pearls, is produced by this specific sedimentary environment. What emerges from this environment are specific biological characteristics of the oyster that interact with external factors, often resulting in transformations that seem to dislocate or disembody the oyster from its original form.

Oysters are known for producing two distinct biological products. The most important one covered in this thesis is the nacre, more commonly known as mother-of-pearl. This substance, widely recognized for its beauty and value, is composed of crystalline calcium carbonate secreted to form the inner layer of the shell. This process creates a mantle with a strength comparable to that of ceramic, yet with greater elasticity (Fougerouse et al., 2008). These colored-lip layered shells are the result of secretion and thickening across the entire outer surface of the mantle over the oyster's lifespan (Gervis and Sims, 1992; Fougerouse et al., 2008). Another product, shaped by the oyster's interaction with its environment, is the pearl itself. Pearls are formed by the same mantle that produces mother-of-pearl, in response to irritation—either from external intrusions such as a grain of sand or from internal sources like a parasite (Liu, 2001). The mantle secretes concentric layers around a nucleus, resulting in the familiar round or oval form of pearls. Understanding the physicality of pearls is essential to understanding their status as luxurious

commodities, as this nacreous secretion turned them into things-in-motion with different encounters in the world market.



IMAGE 3. THE PEARL OYSTER FROM ARU WITH THE NACRE AND PEARLS VISIBLE. COLLECTION OF KITLV, [HTTP://HDL.HANDLE.NET/1887.1/ITEM:822881](http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:822881)

Reflecting upon these environmental ways in which the pearls live, one has situated the Aru islands in a geographical position in order to help unpack the pearl's commodification with the history of the islands. To follow the story of oysters in the Aru Islands is to turn our attention to the silver-lipped species of these pearl-producing oysters, *Pinctada Maxima*. The *P. Maxima* was especially famous after it became evident in the European market in the late nineteenth century, as its industrial exploitation began around the same time in Australia (Starck, 2008). The mother-of-pearl, or the inner nacreous layer of pearls, was highly sought after by European textile markets for use as buttons (Starck, 2008). But to better understand the Aruese connection to pearls' physicality, it is imperative to examine the ecological space in which it sits. Looking at its habitat,

one can see the determining factor in the production of its distinct-colored mother-of-pearl and pearls.

The Aru Islands, as an archipelago, are located between two larger landmasses: the island of Papua (New Guinea), about 150km to the north, and Australia via Arnhem Land, about 550km to the south, connected by a shallow sea (Spriggs *et al.*, 2007). The archipelago is mostly made up of six sizable low-lying islands – Kola, Wokam, Kobraor, Maikor, Koba, and Trangan – and plenty of smaller ones, comprising about 180 islands in total (Spriggs *et al.*, 2007). The overall area of the Aru Islands is quite flat, with the highest point of the island reaching only some 240m above sea level, and the rest of the islands are home to extensive coastal and inland swamps (Spriggs *et al.*, 2007). Throughout, the western and eastern halves of Aru are linked by narrow saltwater channels, referred to locally in Malay as *sungai*—a term that more typically denotes freshwater rivers elsewhere in the Malay world. This *Sungai* – running east to west from north to south – runs through the big islands in the middle between the Front and Backshore, the *Tanah Besar* (lit. Big Land). The three largest ones are Sungai Manumbai, Sungai Wokai, and Sungai Maikoor (Hope & Alpin, 2005), which correspond to the *Tanah Besar* islands (see image 4). With the sea surrounding the islands mostly very shallow, generally less than 20 meters in depth (Hope & Alpin, 2005), it becomes a perfect habitat for pearl oysters to grow.

As Gervis and Sims (1992) pointed out, the best temperature for the oysters to live is generally within the 19 – 32°C range, which suits the temperature of the tropical waters surrounding the Aru Islands, which sit at an average temperature between 25 °C and 32°C, depending on the monsoonal wind throughout the year (Purba *et al.*, 2024). Later, the cultured pearl industry also reported that during winter, a higher number of mortalities were observed in cultured *P. Maxima* (Yamashita,

1986). Therefore, the waters surrounding the warm Australian and Arafura coastline are situated perfectly to yield an “optimum temperature range” in order for the oysters to naturally produce the sought-after naces. Another important environmental factor is the depth of the water. Pearl oysters, especially *P. maxima*, have a depth range of 0-80 meters (Gervis & Sims, 1992), which, when paired with the depth of waters surrounding Aru— around 20 meters deep (Hope & Alpin, 2005), one can conclude that it housed a perfect habitat for the oysters to breed and grow in population.

These differences require us to see the archipelago not as a static, isolated space, but as one that constantly follows the larger pattern of the wider Indonesian monsoon winds. Running through the month of May to October are the Eastern Monsoon winds, which are during the rainy seasons when the Aruese collect many kinds of mollusks and crabs on the beaches or in the mangroves, and work in the garden making sago starch and hunting deer or wild pigs in the savannas and forest of the interior (Osseweijer, 2000). Meanwhile, the months of November to April brought the Western Monsoon winds that enable the Aruese into the rich waters of the Backshore, in which the bulk of the seasonal harvest of pearl oysters, sea cucumber, and shark fishing occurs. It is during these times that the water is much clearer and the sea much calmer, enabling men to dive

for pearls and women to either work in the fields or go out fishing themselves (Persoon *et al.*, 1996).

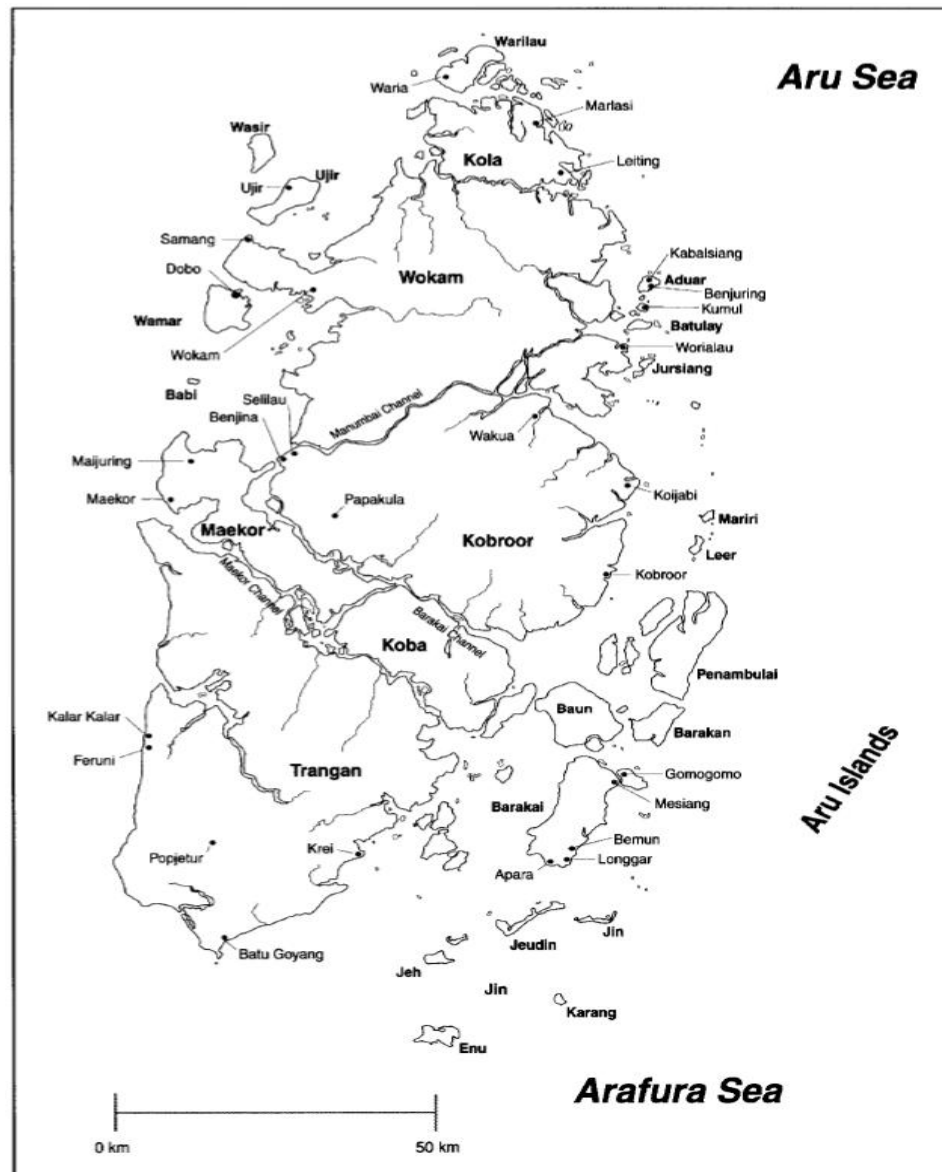


IMAGE 4. A MAP OF THE ARU ISLANDS WITH ACCOMPANYING LOCATION OF THE VARIOUS FRONTSHORE AND BACKSHORE COUNTRIES. SOURCED FROM SPYER, PATRICIA. (2000). THE MEMORY OF TRADE. DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS.

The environment, which is a natural habitat for pearl oysters to thrive, also attracts human attention. While it is difficult to pin down an exact moment when far-flung trade pulls the islands

into attention, Andaya (1993) has pointed out that the trade linking Maluku with the rest of the world can be dated since first 1500 years of the CE (Common Era) when established kingdoms in Western Indonesia such as Sriwijaya, Malaka, and Majapahit would later rise and fall under the rhythm of this trade. Some material artifacts also suggest that the archipelago had trading links as early as 500-800 BP¹. Based on the findings of Peter Lape (2000), which documented red slipped pottery found in the Banda Islands as proof of a pre-colonial network between the spice-producing island of Banda and Aru (Lape, 2000).

It is also important to situate the nature of different types of trade in relation to Aru. Roy Ellen (2003) examines three forms of commodity consumption zones: goods consumed within a local network, between island groups, and in long-distance trade. These groupings, although they operate in different ways, cannot be seen as separate circuits running independently, but rather as a correlating web of exchange and the employment of the politics of value that reveals the trade as interlinked with local and trans-local patterns. Traders from the island of Goram, southeast of Seram, are a particularly important interlocutor for this time period. Vessels from Goram and Kei trade with a diverse array of goods with Aru: oil, sago, *sirih* (betel leaf), *pinang* (areca nut), coconuts, linen, Makassarese dye (originally from Bali and brought by Seramese merchants), elephant tusks, and bronze gongs (Bik, 1824). Some of these items were exchanged for the harvested goods, which would in turn be traded with Makassarese merchants for linen. The silver

¹ Before Present

coins obtained from trade in Aru would then be used by Goram traders to purchase goods in Banda, destined for further exchange with the Papuan communities (Bik, 1824).

Meanwhile, pearls themselves became a prominent trading commodity when the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* or VOC) first recorded its presence in 1660, when a *krankbezoeker*² noticed the abundance of pearl oysters on one of the islands in Aru and noticed the relatively lax pricing demands of the Aruese for pearls (Hägerdal, 2020). Aruese pearls, while relatively smaller than the ones fished from Sri Lanka, undoubtedly became an important export destined for Europe (Boomgaard, 2005). They were used both as jewelry and as medicine (Boomgaard, 2005). Meanwhile, as the VOC had arrived and concluded an official contract with several Aruese villages in 1623, this would increase the VOC's interest in directly controlling the pearling banks. VOC soldiers in the 1640s-50s reported seeing around 70-80 large ships that surrounded the island to dive and harvest pearl oysters (Valentijn, 1856). While this sizeable operation was carried out under the company's gaze, this interest in exploiting the banks directly never yielded the success the Dutch had experienced elsewhere in Asia, such as in Sri Lanka or on the southern coast of Java (Ostroff, 2020; Manez, 2010). Consequently, the trade for pearls with the Dutch in Maluku was controlled mostly by Bandanese free traders or *vrijburgers* from the seventeenth through early nineteenth centuries, as pearls slipped away from the Company's direct production watch, akin to the nutmeg plantations in Banda (Hägerdal, 2019b; van der Linden, 1873).

While Dutch interest in the islands began to wane alongside the liquidation of the VOC at the end of the eighteenth century, due to a variety of factors, including corruption, war with the British,

² Literally means "visitors of the sick", *krankbezoekers* were VOC religious employees which accompanied the sick aboard the ship or their colonies.

and a general trade slump, the Dutch had not shown significant interest in Aru. While this change occurred in the 1790s, the Dutch colonial state thus pursued its own interests and encountered resistance again when the Dutch officer Adrianus Bik visited the islands in 1824. The first such accounts since the islands were last visited by a VOC representative, 25 years earlier. His travel took him to the islands' western coast, where he visited the villages of Wasir, Ujir, Wokam, and Durjela—collectively known as *Depan Tanah* (Malay), *Voorwal* (Dutch), or the Frontshore (English). These villages, referred to locally as *negeri* (or *Negorijen* in Dutch), should be understood not as units of a much larger bureaucratic system, but as autonomous territories independent of state power. Historically, it operated with full autonomy and lacked any centralized political authority across the archipelago.

Although this does not negate the fact that the Aruese did not have a political system that, in many ways, can be categorized as “centralized” in the archipelago, it was centralizing along several lines of societal division. Coming back to Bik's journey, we also see the eastern side of the islands, also known as *Belakang Tanah* (Malay), *Achterwal* (Dutch), or Backshore. There, he visited *negeri* such as Longgar and Aparas on the island of Barakai, where the shallow coastal waters provided ideal conditions for the natural growth of pearl oysters and other natural products. During Bik's 1824 survey, he mentioned that pearl oysters were generally fetched from 4-5 fathoms deep (roughly 7-9 meters) water, where the pearl oysters are available to be seen by the divers. Most of the natural resources are found within the shallow sea of the Backshore, as Bik saw on the islands of Barakai in 1824.

But some pearl banks are also found in the northwestern part of the Frontshore, as the Assistant Resident of Amboina Baron van Hoëvell (1890) noted, that the islands of Toba and Ngoba were

repeatedly visited by the people from *negeri* Batuley (Backshore) to harvest the pearl oysters, which had to pay 10 *kati*³ per one perahu of pearl oysters to the Frontshore *negeri* of Ujir, Samang, and Wasir. Despite this example, the general distribution of roles between the Backshores and Frontshores becomes crucial for understanding the politicization of natural space in Aruese history. The Dutch categorized the differentiated coastal communities, inhibiting, and constructing a logic of power based on degrees of connectivity with the wider non-Aruese mercantile world. This natural geographical difference dynamic was reconstituted by the Dutch to conceptualize a politicized commercial space as a basis for power projection. The Dutch conceptualize the space of Aru as having two polarizing roles: the Backshore, which serves exclusively as a supplier—harvesting trepang and pearl oysters—while the Frontshore serves as the interface for commercial exchange and political negotiation. In an almost tributary in nature, the Dutch saw this political-commercial division as a clear indication that differs significantly from what Aruese might conceptualize as a “productive space”.

These distinct geographical zones (Frontshore and Backshore) were further conceptualized as racializing dichotomies. Such typical colonial encounters were articulated through ethnographic categorization (Stoler and Cooper, 1997), which externally imposed classifications on the Aruese. Particularly in this, is the Backshore *negeri*, where the Dutch categorized the inhabitants under the umbrella term '*Alfur*'. This label, common in colonial discourse, denoted communities that were neither Muslim nor Christian and retained some form of ancestral worship (Moore, 2007). The visiting Dutch looked upon the *sungai* not as a “channel” connecting the two sides of the archipelago, but as a distinct geographical feature that divides the archipelago into two polarizing

³ 1 *kati* is equal to 1 kilogram

dichotomies. Seeing them similar to that of the “hulu-hilir” system of upriver-downriver relationship seen in several other Southeast Asian archipelagos (Andaya, 1995).

This frame of dichotomies turns a geographical feature into a politicized space, thereby shaping how the Dutch colonial state encountered pearl oysters. Especially on the idea of “productivity” and how this regime of value was encountered by the Dutch. This is especially important when considering the development of the market in Aru as part of the archipelago’s vibrant economy of nature’s production, embracing the islands’ external connectivities and stimulating exchange, dispersal, and intercourse with remote consumers of their products (Zerner, 2003). Charles Zerner (2003) coined the term “market-nature-culture” to describe spatial relationships that expand into the Arafura littoral. This idea posits that the Aruese’s relation to the commodification of its natural resource’s rests on its inseparable, overlapping relationship with its commercially productive nature, producing a vibrant, rich, yet blurred space in which its knowledge of these resources is flexible in the face of changes brought to them.

As such, the ideas presented by Geertz (1983) to understand “local knowledge” are not to ascribe them within the realm of what constitutes only by the immediate tangibles that surround it – its time, place, issues – but rather the characterization of the “vernacular imaginings of what can”. These embodied imaginings are deeply tied with Tania Li’s (2000) description of indigenous knowledge as inhabiting the habitus in which the practical, tacit knowledge of their social and physical environment is reflected in the ‘knowing how to go on’ –which improvises and innovates things as necessary and possible. In this sense, the guiding principle of what becomes a productive site situated pearls as an object not dislocated or disembodied by its surroundings, but one that is mutually influenced by them. It is in that worldview that the Aruese have developed a view of the

archipelago as a nexus for the mutual imbrication of “naturally productive space” and “commercially productive nature,” entwined within their cultural patterns (Zerner, 2003). A situated knowledge does, in necessity, attach itself to what its surroundings have ascribed it to produce. Thus, in looking at the Aruese model of pearling, one has to situate oneself in what Manon Osseweijer (2000) has called a dialogue of ‘indigenous knowledge interlocked with exogenous knowledge’. Looking into the trade and commodification of pearls, one can begin to understand the ways in which the controlled mechanisms of pearling are imbricated upon Aruese connectivities with various non-Aruese parties.

During another Dutch survey in 1825, another imperial agent, D.H. Kolff, would label non-Aruese traders such as Sulawesi-based Makassarese and Buginese as no more than “extortioners” and “plunderers” rather than friendly traders, due to the prolonged absence of Dutch control and Christian missionaries in the islands (Kolff, 1825). Contrasting this account, it was clear that the Aruese, far from being an exploitative and an unresponsive figure within this growth of trade, had for the longest time, fully acknowledge their role within the systems that were already fully in place during the Dutch visit in the nineteenth century. Bik (1928 [1824]), who interviewed several Makassarese merchants, provides a glimpse into a pre-colonial relationship between Aru and the surrounding ecological resources—an impression further reinforced by his surveys, which identified the methods the Aruese employed in managing their commercial interactions with foreign traders.

During the pearl fishing season, an agreement between the divers or harvesters and the village head would be conducted prior to fishing the pearl oysters. The merchants would pay a certain amount of compensation in the form of arak, linen, or other goods for every hundred pearl oysters

they harvested. Once the price was agreed upon, they would head to the pearl bank, where the oysters were collected at depths of 4 – 5 fathoms or 7⁴[# ftn3](#) and even 8 – 9 fathoms deep⁵[# ftn4](#) without the help of diving equipment (Bik, 1824; van Kampen, 1922; de Clercq, 1875). Bik simply concluded that the entire operation "depends entirely on luck" (Bik, 1824). Ignoring the Aruese concept of ownership in their encounter with the traders.

Within the same vein, a more detailed account of inter-*negeri* cooperation was written by the Assistant Resident, Baron van Hoëvell (1890). The pearl banks, also known locally as *Sela-Sela* or, in some sources, as *alor*⁶[# ftn5](#), are usually owned communally, and each *negeri* occupant has the right to dive pearl oysters or fish for trepang. In which their catch would then be considered his personal possession, and he does not need to share it with anyone else (van Hoëvell, 1890). Meanwhile, the ship on which they work together lacks clear ownership; instead, it is the responsibility of the crew, who would be held liable (Kampen, 1908). This claim of possession from the dive was closely associated with the title of *Toewan Negeri* (lit. Lord of the Land), which would be appointed to hear any issues in the *negeri* (van Hoëvell, 1890).

Another mechanism described by van Hoëvell (1890) concerns a *negeri* being required to pay compensation to fish at a pearl bank belonging to another *negeri* (van Hoëvell, 1890). This was also highlighted during an opening of the pearl bank, when the head of the *negeri* (possibly an

⁴ van Kampen (1922) also noted that Aruese could dive down to 7 fathoms (about 12 meters)

⁵ Intje Nanggoeng recorded that some can dive to this depth (around 14-16 meters), but not without consequences, as he saw most divers suffer from paralysis, with blood coming from their noses and ears (de Clercq, 1875).

⁶ Particularly to refer to the specific reefs where pearl oysters are found. Van Eijbergen (1864) noted that it was used along the Negeri of Kumul and Batuley along the Backshore.

*Orang Kaya*⁷[#_ftn6](#)) will lead a ceremony that involves all the concerning *negeri*, to cast a sacred item⁸[#_ftn7](#) wrapped in red cloth to drive away the *swangies* (vengeful spirits) and some copper coins into the sea, in the hope to for the pearl bank to give back their sacrifice in a thousand folds. The first catches from the pearl bank would then first be used to celebrate this “opening”. In this sense, a *sasi*, or traditional management system, turned the pearl banks into subjects of the *negeri*’s power to open or close them as per the *negeri*’s convenience.

In this sense, the pearls become a site of riches for 'sAruese's societal landscape, which is, in part, immovable yet fluid in nature. This fluidity is also reflected in the Aruese perception of luck with their fishing. In an 1875 interview with a Javanese scribe, Intje Nanggoeng⁹[#_ftn8](#), the pearl divers would travel, presumably with their fishing vessels, *idawang* or *sebiri*, rather than returning home (De Clercq, 1875). Aruese divers – young and old – were also known to spend days looking and staying in their diving spots (van Kampen, 1909). Intje recorded that they would gather and sleep near this place to keep the luck to their advantage (D. *Voordeel*) by bringing it with them for their next dive (De Clercq, 1875). On the other hand, one could also sleep and incur bad luck, or just generally stay in the same spot for an extended period (De Clercq, 1875). This interesting

⁷ uthority through the manipulation of resources or by becoming a middleman in the commodity trade and communicating with foreign merchants. These Orang Kaya act as intermediaries in exchanges between their associated *negeri* and a foreign party, whether another Aruese *negeri* or non-Aruese traders. (Ellen, 1986).

⁸ Some sources also mentioned the name *Waer-Kola* to refer to this (Hollander, 1898)

⁹ Intje Nanggoeng was a Javanese-born scribe who was employed by the Bureau for Native Affairs (*Bureau voor Indlandsche Zaken*) in Makassar. He was sent to the Aru Islands to write geographical and cultural descriptions for government-sponsored books for the colonial native schools (*Inlandsche Schoolen*). (De Clercq, 1875).

fluidity examines how the “good” and “bad” diving spots are also curated by one’s awareness of how the sea itself behaves.

Aside from pearl, Aruese villages in the Backshore would also practice similar controls on trepang access and pricing. Bik recounted from a Makassarese that the villagers of Aparā would not fish for trepang until they themselves had enjoyed the taxed goods (presumably like the items brought as compensation for pearl diving) and set the price in their own terms per *pikol* (Bik, 1824). In this way, the villagers of Aparā will set the terms and catch the trepang themselves for a certain amount of *oekeer*¹⁰, before the merchants would pay them with goods, they had traded beforehand. Claiming that non-Aruese merchants cheated and exploited the Dutch did not explain the Aruese’s role in the relationship. In a similar manner, whenever a merchant would land and rent out their dwelling in Dobo, the *Orang Kaya* of Wamar would receive payment, usually in the form of arak and cloth (Kolff, 1825). In one short passage, Kolff also mentioned that shortly before giving away these gifts, a conflict in the past was reported between the *Negeri* in the islands of Wamar and Maikor, when one of the *Negeri* accused the other of fishing for pearls in the banks longer and thus was able to obtain a higher share of the catch. Without the presence of the Dutch,

¹⁰ An *oekeer* (ukur) is a weighing system used in Aru for a half of *pikol* (Bik, 1824). One *Pikol* is equivalent to 136lb or 61 kga (Caldwell, 2012: 77)

they agree that the accused party, henceforth, would not fish that would exceed their right (Kolff, 1876 [1825]).

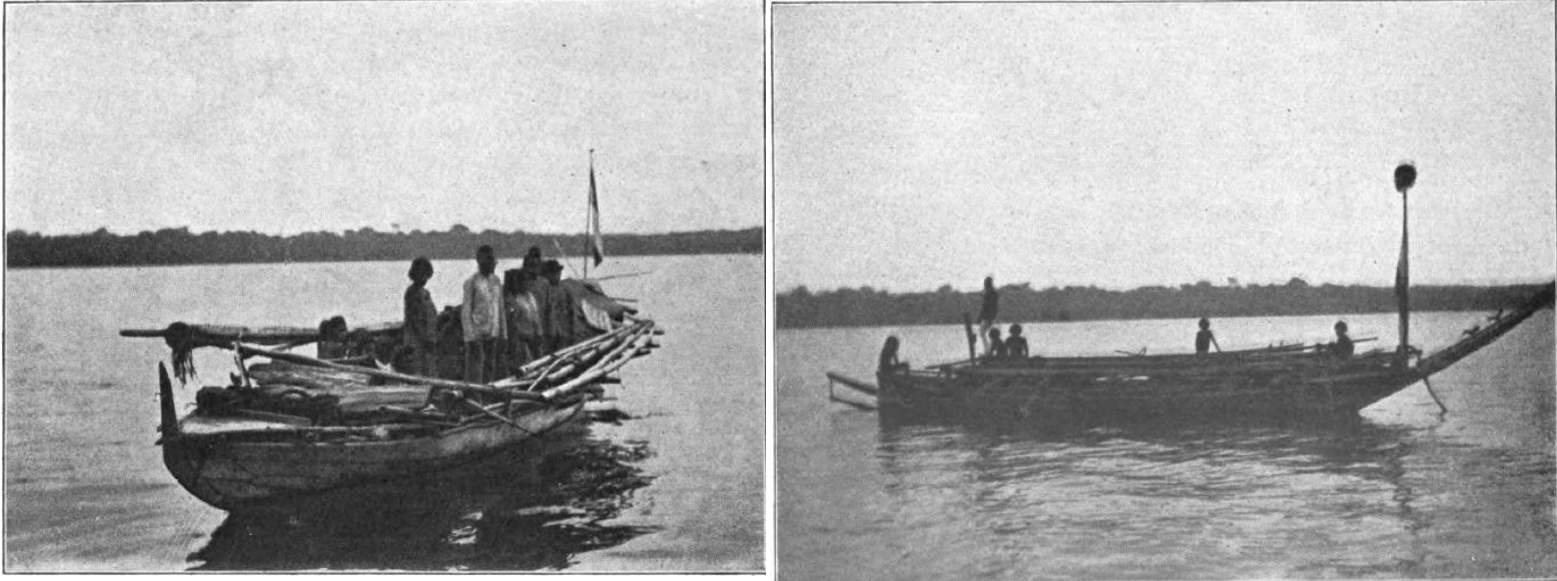


IMAGE 5. BELANG (LEFT) AND IDAWANG (RIGHT). A TYPE OF FISHING VESSEL USED BY THE ARUESE TO DIVE FOR PEARLS (SOURCE: KAMPEN, 1922).

This left an imprint visible that their access to commodities was inseparable from their nature-market-culture spaces, as access for specific incoming commodities was tied to Aruese's ideas of kinship and society. In particular, within these commodities are several spiritual and wealth signifiers that were dubbed “De Rijkdom der Alfoeren” or “Riches of the Alfurs” (Bik, 1824), or, as Bosscher (1854) quoted in Malay, *harta* (E. possessions, riches). These prestige goods are not directly related to harvesting pearls or trepang but are more closely associated with defining social status (Ellen, 2003). They have become essential to the maintenance of ritual cycles in which objects become embedded within the construction of power, control, and manipulation (Ellen, 1988). These commodities include elephant tusks, bronze gongs, and porcelain. Bik (1928 [1824]) described, during his visit to the Backshore village of Apra, that these riches were buried in the ground out of fear that Papuan pirates would steal them. Aside from the fear of these pirates, these

objects are of special interest. Bik's observations during his visit to the Backshore village of Apari highlight this convergence of material and spiritual value. These objects functioned not merely as signifiers of wealth but also as bridewealth and dowry items, formalizing relationships and embedding debt, desire, and obligation into their societal structures (Spyer, 1997).

Andaya (2016) also expounds on this topic by linking the ritually important items of elephant tusks and bronze gongs in Eastern Indonesia to those introduced by Indic-influenced civilizations of Southeast Asia. Looking more closely at its cultural significance, these items symbolized rain and fertility (through their original conception as objects closely aligned with the Vedic God of lightning and rain, Indra) and were used in some Eastern Indonesian communities to signify elite status and authority (Andaya, 2016). This symbol of wealth was invaluable to the Aruese, to the point that even the possibility of not receiving them as bridewealth for a wedding between a man from the negeri Durjella and a woman from Wokam sparked fear that their alliances would break down (van Eijbergen, 1862). Another example of this importance was seen in 1864, when a Buginese man demanded that the harta dowry be returned after his wife, Boki Santang, daughter of a man in Ujir, was discovered to have married another man from Gorom, unbeknownst to the Buginese man. The conflict was resolved when the Orang Kaya of Ujir ordered the father, Wasamsie, to return half of the dowry after deliberating with van Eijbergen (van Eijbergen, 1864).

Thus, through encounters with the pearl oysters and their significant place in the Aruese economy, the Dutch also saw their potential to spur movements that would undermine perceptions of the colonial state's presence in the islands. This was particularly reflective when seeing the debt practice in the Backshore Negeri. These debts, drawing on Patricia Spyer's concept of "the eroticism of debt" (1997), explore how trade relations and indebtedness shaped the construction

of self and other within Aruese communities. Rather than viewing debt solely as a form of economic dependency or exploitation, Spyer reframes it as a relational and affective structure—a system in which material exchanges are saturated with emotion, obligation, and negotiation. This is particularly evident in the Backshore communities of Aru, where material convergence—pearls, trepang, and prestige goods—and social bonds and morals intertwine. Indebtedness, in this context, is not merely transactional; it is constitutive of Backshore Aruese's sense of self.

This way of defining relations was reflected within the colonial writings by Bik (1928 [1824]), van Hovevell (1890), Bosscher (1854), and van Eijbergen (1862), who frequently condemned these practices of debt-bonding as harmful, irrational, or morally corrupting. A particularly illustrative moment can be found in Bik's (1928 [1824]) account of his visit to the negeri of Longgar on the island of Barakai, where he sought to install an Orang Kaya under Dutch authority. He outlined their obligations, which included an unwavering commitment to the colonial state, the resolution of disputes, and, notably, the protection of merchants who came to the Backshore during the trading season. Bik (1928 [1824]) emphasized what he saw as a persistent problem that governed the interaction between the Aruese and non-Aruese party: “the Alfoeren tend to take more goods on credit from the merchants than they can repay during the harvest season.” He linked this to moral failings, such as drunkenness, and even implored the Longgarese to reduce their arak intake lest social order be disrupted.

Yet such interpretations reflect more on colonial anxiety towards other forms of economic circulation than on the realities of Aruese lives. As Spyer emphasizes, this is not a simplistic, didactic relationship between non-Aruese traders and Aruese divers. Instead, it is a negotiated dynamic, marked at times by subversive entanglement with non-Aruese traders rather than pure

subordination. Taking the form of “sea wives”, Backshore men who caught their first oysters were seen as a successful creation of a bond with a female sea spirit that would in turn become their “wife” (Spyer, 1997). In this engendered encounter, the “sea wives” became inseparable from the allure of wealth and the dangers that came with the practice of pearl diving itself. The oysters that would generate profits for the divers would then be diverted back into the goods demanded by the sea wives for successfully helping the diver with their catch – betel, bits of tobacco, and porcelain plates – that would perpetuate the indebtedness of the Aruese with the seasonal traders (Spyer, 1997).

The disjunctive ways in which pearls were commodified in Aru were then activated, negotiated, and circulated in ways that bound individuals and communities through symbolic gestures. These interactions demonstrated how Backshore Aruese communities navigated their complicit entanglement with external trade not through forceful bondage, but through the active reworking of economic obligations into cultural and environmental meaning (Spyer, 1997; Dolcemascolo, 1996). Their sense of place and belonging was shaped not by isolation but by the conscious negotiation of external dependencies—of debts to foreign traders, and responsibilities toward their sea wives. The commercial network surrounding Aru expanded and intensified, particularly with the commodification of pearl shells.

The idea of a “productive Aru” thus captured the imagination of colonial figures who envisioned the islands as a vital commercial gateway to Eastern Indonesia. Adrian Vickers (2019) has used the term “Pearl Rush” to engage with the effects of commodification on pearl oysters in early twentieth-century Aru. The islands were a site akin to “Klondike”, a feverish moment of exploitation that provides a basis for the interaction of multiple ideas surrounding their production

and consumption. Within this feverish reality, Dutch colonial authorities positioned themselves as its paternalistic benefactors, responsible for cultivating the islands' potential as a thriving international port—particularly for Australian pearl-shelling companies. Australian maritime historian Steve Mullins (2001) described this arrangement as a “colonial compromise,” a unique moment of cooperation between the Dutch and British colonial powers, in which both parties agreed to foster trade, business, and political stability on the islands. As this framing reflects a degree of colonial solidarity between rival powers, it fails to account for the internal tensions, local disputes, and the arbitrary imposition of colonial power upon the Aruese community. As the next sub-chapter explains, “productive” is imagined as a spatial bond of control and profitability for the state.

The fetishization through which the Aruese managed their relationship is clearly refracted and can be seen as a main conduit through which relationships are attached to indebtedness that affixes their sense of self. Through this relationship of momentary bondedness with ecological and material “riches”, it becomes an untranslatable part of 'sAruese's lifeworld that did not reflect what one might simply see as a one-way subjugation, but rather a standpoint in their place-making. Existing in this lifeworld, the land- and sea itself became part of the moral terrain—an extension of the Aruese self, shaped by the indebtedness and desires for natural resources flowing through it.

Thus, as the politics of “productivity” of the colonial state converged in the spiritual realm that binds together objects and the source of wealth – pearls – into this terminus of constant renegotiations, it transforms the logics of gift exchange and meaning away from this ecological embeddedness. What had once been a space of negotiation and a constant flux of fluid ontologies,

the sea became refracted through the lenses of rigid understandings of exchange, value, and obligation brought forth by the sojourning Dutch imperial agents. The colonial state instrumentalized this order, muting the sea and what lives above and below it, singling them out only as a site of extractive production. This will be further illustrated in the following sub-chapter.

III. Pearls as Things-In-Motions

Recalling Wallace's stay within a *negeri* in *Tanah Besar* called Wanumbai (Manumbai), he encountered an old man from the village who asked what would happen to the well-preserved birds, insects, and shells that had collected in Aru. Wallace replies that it will be stuffed and displayed in a transparent glass case in an English museum. The old man from Manumbai asked again, "What did you think became of them? They all come to life again, don't they?" Wallace tried to jokingly reply, but the old man, with an air of deep conviction, said, "Yes, they all come to life again, that's what they do – they all come to life again" (Wallace, 2008 [1869]). In that moment, Wallace was, for a brief moment in time, a custodian of Aruese things, preserving them only for the journey in which their spirits animate the things once it is detached far enough from Aru. Within that same vein, we can understand the idea of pearls as things-in-motion.

A particularly useful concept to illustrate this further is "object itineraries" (Joyce & Gillespie, 2015), which comprehensively figures the ways in which things "travel" not merely as a stable, passive object moving in the physical space constructed by humans, but as an active agent that creates its own space. This then begs the question of how the things reproduced, transformed, and moved were neither dead nor alive yet broke away from the conventional understanding of temporality. While looking at pearls as an extension of Kopytoff's (1986) "Biography of Things",

which entangle a sense of birth, adulthood, and death for things, it is imperative to also understand them as things that sit within the “boom” and “bust” cycles for their exoticized relations with the global market (Spyer, 2000). This cycle looks at pearls not singlehandedly as a reanimated object that has and always will contain an “afterlife”. It rather moves through time in a recursive manner and endures in many iterations of forms and movements. Just as the collected fauna by Wallace was understood in the Manumbaiese eyes as constantly in motion and full of movement, pearls, as things have to be understood to have their own itinerary, which intersects with temporality and spatiality.

To understand this itinerary, it is important to contextualize the situatedness of colonial engagement within an Aruese context. In other words, we must first understand the islands’ commercial and social role in the larger local and global trade network. Especially important here for our understanding is the late eighteenth-century trade pattern that becomes a template for Aruese trade in the nineteenth century. Anthony Reid (2004) characterizes the period as the “boom” of China-oriented trade or more boldly as “Chinese Century”, marking a resurgence of Asian agency during a lull in European dominance. The collapse of the once-dominant VOC and the disruptions it caused had rendered many Asian states more reclusive and wary of foreign elements (Reid, 1997). But the stagnation of the Dutch-led VOC and the broader European conflicts of the late eighteenth century, especially those stemming from the Napoleonic Wars, ushered in an era in which Asian actors re-emerged on the regional commercial stage. A contraction, rather than a more suitable term, best describes how Asian agents responded to European expansion in trade and politics. In what can only be described as a “Chinese Century,” late eighteenth-century Qing China experienced rapid population and economic growth, which in

turn led to a lasting period of peace and relative prosperity, spurring trade in nearby Southeast Asia (Reid, 2004).

Through internal political stabilization and improved relationships with neighboring states, Qing China in the late 1700s and early 1800s began to promote trade throughout Southeast Asia (Reid, 2004). This surge noticeably came at a time when Southeast Asian trade was emerging from the stagnation it had experienced since 1650, a period that followed the classical “Age of Commerce” between 1530 and 1630, when trade was expansive and highly dynamic (Reid, 2004). The combination of population growth and a general improvement in wealth and living conditions in China created the perfect environment for increased trade and commercial activity. In the mid-eighteenth century, the last imperial bans on private Chinese trade and travel abroad were lifted, encouraging Chinese junks to travel to Southeast Asia (Reid, 2004). This Chinese commercial expansion was paralleled by Western industrialization in the nineteenth century, which brought a commercial boom across the Anglosphere's colonies in Southeast Asia. This combination resulted in a proliferation of demand for Southeast Asian products to supply both European (e.g., coffee, tobacco, sugar) and Chinese (e.g., pepper, tin, rice, gambier, forest and sea products) markets, consolidating through the establishment of British and Chinese commercial networks that came to dominate the region (Lieberman, 1997).

This demand for certain raw natural products flowed into the newly rejuvenated intra-Asian trade network, triggering a cascading effect in markets for specific natural goods from Eastern Indonesia. In this context, we see how the late eighteenth-century Asian market boom influenced local Indonesian merchants to expand and strengthen their commercial networks. Situating this period of Asian commercial expansion, one cannot ignore the integral role of Makassarese traders,

who entangled the Indonesian archipelago with the international market. This expansion reached even the remote corners of the archipelago, including the Aru Islands, offering opportunities that attracted both established and emerging trade networks.

Trade brought with it the movement of both goods and people across a range of commercial centers, forming an interconnected web that tied the Aru Islands to the broader emerging markets beyond their coastline. Simultaneously, the long shadow of European presence in the region began to resurface, most notably through a series of politically motivated surveys. During the initial re-establishment of contact by official Dutch surveyors in 1824, an air of ambiguous standing toward the burgeoning trade in Aru was strongly reflected in their recollections. The early years of the nineteenth century were marked by a profusion of wariness for the local trading network that might circumvent Dutch-controlled ports in the archipelago.

In general, trade was viewed as an acceptable practice, yet also inherently illicit, as it breeds unmonitored movement across the vast waters between the islands. The Aru Islands were strategically located due to their proximity to rich trepang grounds and, importantly, as one of the key centers where the Makassarese collected trepang in the shallow waters hugging many of its islands. While trepang is widely recognized as a Chinese-centered product valued as a culinary delicacy (MacKnight, 1976; Sutherland, 2000; Mañez & Ferse, 2010), the same cannot be said for the commodification of pearl oysters. The oyster's pattern of commodification follows what Bill

Brown (2001) has conceptualized as “Thing Theory”. This theory views the meaning of an object as defined by movement, often transforming its original significance.

By thinking of pearl oysters as objects with their own itineraries, pearl shells are becoming more fluid things-in-motion that proliferate as signifiers of meaning across different social, cultural, religious, and moral values within certain societies and regions (Machado, 2019). As previously discussed, the politics of productivity nestled within the lifeworld of Aruese inhabitants were embedded in this very intersection of wider material circulation and consumption patterns. While the social and traditional associations of pearl oyster products are undoubtedly key to their value, attention also needs to be drawn to how trade and movement have shaped their value.

Pearling, as a term for its extraction and modes of production, is more often linked to businesses that were exclusively “Asian” in nature, while the journey into the object’s consumption proved more complex and diverse (Clarence-Smith, 2019). Willem G. Clarence-Smith (2019) notes that in the nineteenth century, pearl oyster-product markets diverged by material: actual pearls were predominantly desired and consumed in South and East Asia, while mother-of-pearl was in high demand among European and American consumers. They were used decoratively in fashion industries and distributed mainly in the nineteenth-century imperial metropolises of London, Paris, and New York City (Clarence-Smith, 2019). These distinct markets, depending on material demand, influenced the local effects of global trade on the Aru Islands.

This pattern of trade ran concurrently in the Indonesian archipelago, with the emergence of the British trading settlement in Singapore. The port-city became a hub for Eastern Indonesian ships, particularly from Sulawesi, carrying natural products from Eastern Indonesia to Chinese markets,

mostly in Amoy (present-day Xiamen) (Kobayashi, 2013). The rise of Singapore consolidated British and Chinese commercial networks, a development essential to later understanding Dutch perceptions of trade in the Aru Islands. By examining the commodification through this wider global trade network, we can see how the integration of Western markets for pearl oyster products transformed demand for it in Aru, spurring its natural products into the reemerging Asian trading network.

The combination of expanding commercial opportunities and the availability of valuable marine products in Aru motivated Sulawesi-based merchants—mostly Makassarese and Buginese—to seek natural harvesting sites along the shallow seas of Eastern Indonesia. Sojourning as far as modern-day northern Australia in Arnhem Land and the Kimberley coast, also known as *Marege* and *Kayu Jawa* in the Makassarese language (MacKnight, 1976). MacKnight (1976) argues that the Makassar trepang industry laid the groundwork for British interest in Australia's northern coast, as trade in goods brought commercial and political interests into play. And just like the British efforts to dominate Chinese trade through Singapore (Lieberman, 1997), this interest becomes increasingly significant in the eyes of the colonial state. It was not only the British with their respective spheres of influence, but the gaze was also shared by their colonial counterpart, the Dutch.

As a product of these fluid and concurrent commercial and political currents, the Aru Islands emerged as an important trading hub, frequented by various sojourning traders. The valuable commodities of pearl oysters as well as trepang, birds-of-paradise plumes, and edible bird's nest, and other naturally harvested products flowed through the harbor town of Dobo, becoming a pivotal stopover where natural resources were exchanged for goods, and in the manner of the

nineteenth century, mostly Western industrial products. This confluence of trade and inter-regional movement extended beyond the transregional Sulawesi or Chinese commercial networks, encompassing a range of local pre-colonial long-established trading systems of diverse origins. Roy Ellen (2003) includes this localized nexus of trade points across much of the southwestern Maluku islands of Seram, Goram, and Kei.

This development revived even older networks in the area, such as the *Sosolot* exchange system (Goodman, 1998). The *Sosolot* were a network of trade settlements maintained by Southeast Seramese merchants – Seram Laut, Goram, and Watubela – along the southwestern coast of Papua. These merchants exercised a degree of monopoly over ports in the Bird’s Head region of Papua, trading Papuan forest products and slaves with Malukan goods such as finished glass and wooden ware, cloths, alongside items of religious significance such as cloths and irons (Goodman, 1998). Such pre-existing, interlinked local and inter-regional networks flourished anew during this period, signaling a revival of maritime movement and trade that had been largely submerged under earlier European—especially VOC—dominance in Maluku.

To further contextualize this diverse commercial landscape in more historically concrete terms, one must also examine how the perception of trade and movement was viewed from the eyes of the Dutch colonial state. The colonial government's concern over its trade and political position in the region was further emphasized by C. Bosscher, the Assistant Resident of Amboina. In 1854, Bosscher published statistical data on the Aru Islands in the Dutch colonial journal *Tijdschrift voor Indische Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*—, one of the earliest detailed records on the region’s natural resources, population, and economy. In his report, he provided specific quantities and itemized

lists of exports and imports for the years 1849, 1850, and 1851. To illustrate the flow of commodities during this period, the table below lists the specific articles recorded in Aru.

Imported Goods of European Origin	1849	1850	1851
Wools and <i>Katoen</i> items	<i>f</i> 16,175	<i>f</i> 27,810	<i>f</i> 23,208
Silver, Steel, and Copper works	<i>f</i> 9,202	<i>f</i> 11,307	<i>f</i> 8,519
Provision and drinks	<i>f</i> 1,302	<i>f</i> 918	<i>f</i> 1,722
Weapons	<i>f</i> 5,025	<i>f</i> 3,710	<i>f</i> 4,480
Earth and Glass wares	<i>f</i> 415	<i>f</i> 900	-
Household Items	<i>f</i> 5,500	<i>f</i> 5,290	<i>f</i> 4,460
Total	<i>f</i>37,619	<i>f</i>49,935	<i>f</i>42,389
Imported Goods of Asian Origin	1849	1850	1851
Wools and <i>Katoen</i> items	<i>f</i> 20,870	<i>f</i> 23,900	<i>f</i> 19,300
<i>Karong</i> (coarse sack)	<i>f</i> 1,044	<i>f</i> 1,170	<i>f</i> 756
Metals	<i>f</i> 793	<i>f</i> 950	<i>f</i> 1,730
Elephants Tusks	<i>f</i> 1,875	<i>f</i> 2,500	<i>f</i> 2,650
Earthen wares	<i>f</i> 1,640	<i>f</i> 2,210	<i>f</i> 1,700
Drinks	<i>f</i> 19,722	<i>f</i> 17,118	<i>f</i> 20,652
Crops	<i>f</i> 46,370	<i>f</i> 42,100	<i>f</i> 4,950
Total	<i>f</i>92,114	<i>f</i>89,948	<i>f</i>96,308

TABLE 1. IMPORTED GOODS OF EUROPEAN AND ASIAN ORIGIN TO THE ARU ISLANDS, 1849-1851 (BOSSCHER, 1854: 374).

The numbers, mostly from goods that passed through Dobo via Makassar, did not account for smaller vessels belonging to the Gorom or Kai Islanders, which may have annually contributed up to *f*2,500 worth of trade to Aru (Bosscher, 1854). According to the data provided by Bosscher, items originating in Asia continued to dominate trade in Aru, particularly textiles for clothing, beverages (presumably alcoholic drinks such as arak), staple crops like sago, and ritually

significant items such as Elephant Tusks. This surge in trade was driven by the expansion of natural products harvested from the islands, as illustrated in the table below.

Exported Goods	1849	1850	1851
Mother-of-Pearls	<i>f</i> 117,648	<i>f</i> 124,828	<i>f</i> 116,640
Trepang	<i>f</i> 32,688	<i>f</i> 29,200	<i>f</i> 45,150
Edible Birds' Nests	<i>f</i> 8,866	<i>f</i> 10,000	<i>f</i> 9,300
Rubber	<i>f</i> 288	<i>f</i> 390	<i>f</i> 420
Pearls	<i>f</i> 16,400	<i>f</i> 12,000	<i>f</i> 14,000
Total	<i>f</i> 175,890	<i>f</i> 176,418	<i>f</i> 185,510

TABLE 2. EXPORTED GOODS FROM ARU ISLANDS, 1849-1851 (BOSSCHER, 1854: 376)

The value of products exported from Aru would eventually reach *f* 261,500 in 1859, with most exports consisting of pearl oysters—amounting to *f* 180,000 at *f* 60 per pikol (“Beknopt Overzicht van Den Handel Op de Aroe Eilanden,” 1859). This commercial bustle was vividly captured during Wallace’s stay in the 1857 trading season. The British naturalist described the scene in the bustling harbor town of Dobo as follows: piles of firewood were being stacked; sailmakers and carpenters were hard at work; bundles of mother-of-pearl shell were being tied; and smoked trepang was laid out in the sun to dry before being loaded onto ships. Meanwhile, crews from Seram and Gorom unloaded their sago cakes for the return voyages of Makassarese and Chinese traders (Wallace, 2008 [1869]). Wallace also remarked on the abundance and affordability of European goods accessible to ordinary Aruese: English calicoes and American cotton cloths, muskets, common scissors, German knives, and other cutlery, cotton wares, and earthenware (Wallace, 2008 [1869])—the same articles previously documented by Bosscher.

Looking back at object itineraries, it is important to imagine the rhythm and melodies of the trade, which closely accompanied the Dutch’s politics of value for pearl oysters. The entry of a rival

colonial power stirred alarm over the Dutch imaginings of power in Aru. Colonial newspapers in the Netherlands Indies began drawing on the importance of Aru as part and parcel of a continuous unit of colonial territory. As can be seen here, the projection of an imagined imperial terrain has been established, functioning to reaffirm the metropole's conception of territoriality. Especially as the Dutch presence in the Arafura and Papua was, in many ways, seen as "slippery and informal" ("Oprechte Haarlemsche Courant," 1886), contradicting the appropriate measures that the bureaucratic state should take. As trade expanded from the early nineteenth century, the Aru Islands increasingly drew the attention of Europeans, particularly within the British commercial networks spanning Southeast Asia and Australia.

While earlier commercial entanglements from Singapore have already been discussed, a more significant shift would emerge from the south. By the 1870s, various European and American vessels had begun appearing in the Arafura Sea, including American whalers and Australian pearl shellers, particularly in the Torres Strait region just south of Papua ("Decentralisatie," 1874; "Koloniaal Verslag over 1872. Mededeelingen Van Staatkundigen En Algemeenen Aard," 1872). One Dutch newspaper even referred to the American whalers as "*vrijbuiters*"—freebooters or pirates ("Amerika," 1885). With limited resources to effectively monitor the vast, dispersed Outer Islands, the Dutch grew increasingly wary as unmonitored trade continued to grow. With one newspaper even accusing the Dutch government of apparent neglect and of limiting the appointment of any colonial bureaucrat in the Outer Islands, which will invite the English to the doorstep of the archipelago ("Persoverzicht.," 1883).

Through the publication of Wallace's work, Australians began wandering curiously into the Arafura Seas. John Walter Tyas arrived with the schooner *Jessie* in 1872 to inquire about the riches

of Aru (Mullins, 2019), then followed suit by J.T. Cockerell, who visited the islands in 1874 (“A Visit To The Aru Islands,” 1874). Although immediate Australian search for pearl oysters showed unpromising result by Tyas – mainly due to mistakes in harvesting season – (Mullins, 2019), Australian pearl sheller began increasingly present in Aru and stopped in Dobo multiple times during their venture out to Papua while viewing Dutch jurisdiction in Aru was nothing than mere “shadowy claim” (Mullins, 2019). This comes concurrently with the opening of Port Essington in the Northern Territory of Australia, as well as various other ports established in Northern Australia to outwardly project Australia’s settler-colonial policies and to monitor trade and combat “piracy” (Allen, 1972). The Dutch perceive themselves as tightly squeezed by their colonial counterparts from multiple directions.

Thus, the Dutch colonial state would pursue its own personal project by exerting palpable anxiety and asserting a sense of “governability” and “control” over these situations. With the growing influence of the Australians, the Dutch then began to grow wearier of their own influence in the Aru Islands and attempted to shift from a fluid, informal form of control to a more direct approach in which control over access to pearls would be detrimental. Australian entry into the Aru Islands will continue into the early twentieth century, and the events surrounding it will significantly alter the course of Aru’s history. The colonial state’s perceptions and logic of productivity then mold into an imperial logic in which the fluidity of pearls is open to control of access, a conquest of the sandy waters of Aru. But while this part of the story will be discussed extensively in the following chapter, it is important for us to look back and examine how the movement of pearls can be seen in the logical formation of the colonial state amid the heterogeneity of its meanings.

Conclusion

Encountering the wealth of Aru, the colonial state thus perceives the practice of pearling as suspicious. Both through the trading network that carried the oysters beyond the shore of Aru and the practice which surround the harvesting of the oysters. The “Unstable Space” that pearls occupy in Aru has turned into a source of colonial anxiety. It is apparent that the expansion of the British and Asian trade network throughout the nineteenth century has fueled this encounter with pearls, which differs significantly from reading the colonial sources against the grain. This layer of slipperiness and relationality between Aruese and the oysters tends to create a backlash over significant ideas such as “productivity” and “ownership”. The former was not necessarily tied to ideas of material and extractive productivity, but more so to societal conditions. Dutch encounters in the early years of the nineteenth century placed constant focus on the growing trade and the debt practices that came with it, as the potential to bring about conflict and an unharmonious condition for Dutch imperial control in Aru.

Meanwhile, the latter – “ownership” – became a greater concern that came from the expansion of European trade in the eastern part of the archipelago. Logics of productivity that emerged right after the decline of the VOC in the area situate Aru within the slipperiness of direct colonial ownership. As portrayed by the visiting Dutch officers from Adrianus Bik in 1824 to Baron van Hoevell in the 1890s, the debt or credit bond between Aruese and outside traders was seen as a burdensome practice that did not serve the interests of the Aruese. While the reality of such debt or credits was more complex and nuanced. The Aruese's entrance into such contracts came

alongside a mixed practice in which the Aruese and outside traders navigated the fluid nature of ownership over the pearling banks, the right to dive, and, finally, the oysters themselves.

The “unstable space” turns the pearl oysters into things that came into being through their value of exchange as commodities. Telling its story through Wallace, Adrianus Bik, Baron van Hoevell, and P.N. van Kampen, all of whom tell a story in which the meaning of the oysters was inseparable from its motions and movements that was slippery and could never be pinned down into one category. Therefore, here the oysters served as a centering force, from which their relevance and meaning emerged to varying degrees. This was also reflected in the meaning of the oysters, which had been moving through different temporalities. While the early nineteenth-century Dutch colonial state focused on the oyster’s growth internally through debt practices and inter-local trade from Sulawesi, Goram, and Kai, by the nineteenth century, an epistemic shift had begun. Colonial rivalries between the Dutch and other forces in the area – mainly Australia – dictate a hierarchy of events, in which interest in pearls centers on the colonial state’s need to adjust and reorder the oyster as an object directly under its control.

Chapter II

Performing Power in Aru

I. Imagining the Metropole from Aru



IMAGE 6. A PORTRAYAL OF AN ORANG KAYA FROM THE ISLAND OF GORAM, IN 1865. THE ORANG KAYA OF ARU WAS ALSO ADORNED IN THE SAME MANNER, PARTICULARLY THE POSSESSION OF THE ROTTINGKNAPPEN, THE SILVER-TIPPED CANE, SYMBOLIZING THEIR POWER AND RELATIONSHIP WITH THE DUTCH. SOURCE: VON ROZENBERG, 1865.

During one of the many visits by Dutch administrators throughout the nineteenth century, a particularly interesting description was given in 1862. The time was 8 in the morning, the date was June 22nd, 1862, amidst the Eastern Monsoon, the Dutch officer van Eijbergen donned his costume

and called upon all the concerned *Orang Kaya* and *Orang Tua* from various *negeri* of the Frontshore and Backshore, to gather for one last time before his departure (*eindsvergadering*). Van Eijbergen was planning to use the *Roema Compagnie* (the Old VOC house) but instead had to use a house built by a recurrent previous officer who would stay in Dobo to mediate a dispute; the so-called Mr. Waasbergen's house (van Eijbergen, 1862). Among those who had come to deliberate were the heads of the three Frontshore *negeri* (Ujir, Samang, Wangil, and Pengambil), alongside representatives from Batuley and Manumbai, around 10 traders (mostly of Buginese, Makassarese, or Chinese background), and local Christian school teachers. One of the old *orang kaya* of Ujir still carried an old silver-tipped cane with an engraving that read: "The Marshal and Governor-General Daendels to the Orang Kaya of Oedjir, Bole Bole, for his proven loyalty in the year 1808." It was a year in which the Dutch VOC fort in Wokam was surrounded by a local resistance against the Dutch, for which the *orang kaya* of Ujir rowed to Banda in order to alert the Dutch forces there (van Eijbergen, 1862). The gathering, which occurred at mid-morning, also invited the attention of Aruese women and regular villagers to come and see the Dutch steamship, or *Kapal Api*, anchored in Dobo (van Eijbergen, 1862).

The costumes and the meeting location were deliberately chosen to echo the power that "naturally" represented itself through the presence of the Dutch officer. Van Eijbergen did not only don the costume to give himself the power to deliberate and decide for the Aruese, but also to embody the colonial state, invoking the Governor General of Batavia through his gesture and theatrical performativity. With this striking passage in mind, this chapter examines how the metropole is invoked and interpreted in Aru's imagination. Departing from the usual narrative of Aru, crushed under the weight of the expanding bureaucracy of Batavia, succumbing to the colonial state. In this chapter, that story will be complicated by closely reading the ethnographic

encounters in their reports to examine how the complex lifeworld of Aru influenced and pushed the Dutch officers and administrators to reimagine the sources of power and control in Aru. Questions such as these will be asked here: What happened when the administrator invoked the Governor General or Batavia? And where or whose power might be enacted and rescinded over the colonial state's bureaucratic operations?

Throughout this chapter, looking at the way power was performed - the bestowing of a title by a colonial officer, the appointment of *orang kaya*, the “closing” and “opening” of the pearling banks- functions to perform a projection of state power. This chapter will engage with several aspects of this conception of power, which ultimately stem from Aru's imbrication with its seascape. The inherent qualities of its shifting waters have turned the islands into places where human actors constantly negotiate with the sea and its dwellers. Again, at the center of the discussion are pearl oysters and how they might disturb colonial narratives. By looking at how pearls and Aru were mentioned in the sources, we can ask questions that aim to disturb the seemingly totalizing, continuous story of the colonial state. The most important aspect of this task is to reveal how colonial logic shapes Aru's epistemology. If pearls and the perception of power become an important part in telling the history of Aru, in what way can we look at this understanding by closely reading the sources?

Therefore, in this chapter, I would like to examine how the pearls directly influenced the exercise of power. In the first part of this chapter, I will look again at the Dutch officer Adrianus Bik's visit in 1824 and unpack how power was performed by the Dutch administrators. It will then add more sources coming from other similar encounters or from other types of materials (such as magazines and newspapers) to complicate the state's narrative of power in Aru. To begin

unpacking the story, we have to start with the political relationship between the various Aruese *negeri* and the Dutch state at the turn of the nineteenth century. Even before the end of the nineteenth century, the Aru Islands were scarcely under the immediate governance of the Dutch colonial state. Despite the region's strategic significance, the initial importance of Aru to the Dutch VOC stemmed mostly from its connection to the nutmeg-producing Banda Islands to its north. It was this link that spurred the first documented contact between the VOC—represented by Jan Carstenszoon in 1623 aboard the ship *Arnhem*—and the head of the western coast village of Ujir. This meeting resulted in an agreement regarding their trade with Banda, alongside the Moluccan city of Ambon (Schapper, 2018). This arrangement extends beyond a mere trading agreement for the Dutch company to a bedrock of political loyalty and commitment to participate in the company's monopoly practice. It reaffirmed the Dutch influence over the Aruese.

For the incoming Dutch at that time, this agreement was seen as particularly significant as the VOC sought to reinforce Banda's role within its trade network following the Company's genocidal campaign on the island. This campaign, which came after the Dutch forced their way to directly control the lucrative nutmeg trade in the island, resulted in the killings of native Bandanese in the infamous genocide of 1621. The mace and mace of the nutmeg tree, which had given the island an important place within the larger network of trade, were now under the direct commercial control of the VOC, in which an intensive slave-driven plantation economy was implemented (Hägerdal, 2020). This genocidal campaign to fully control this trade led to the forced dispersion of surviving

Bandanese across Southern Maluku, including Aru, which would spread the message of the massacre by the VOC (Schapper, 2018).

To secure trade confidence between the other islands in Maluku and Banda, the Dutch officer sent one of their officers, Jan Carstenzoon, aboard the ship *Arnhem* to sail for Aru in January 1623 – just two years after the genocide (Hägerdal, 2020). This early voyage would then cement the first official Dutch commercial and political contract with Aru, which was represented by the main trading Frontshore *negeri* of Ujir (Hägerdal, 2020). In this contract, the VOC hoped to secure trade between Banda and Aru to maintain supplies of sago, slaves, and various forest products, keeping the nutmeg slave system profitable for the company (Hägerdal, 2020). This contact continued until the company's dissolution and liquidation in 1799, when its authority over the Indonesian archipelago passed to the Dutch state. In navigating these troubled waters, just after the Napoleonic wars in Europe, the Dutch devoted little to no resources to maintaining their presence in the Aru Islands, far from the colonial agricultural and political center of Java. There was no recorded Dutch state employee who returned to gain political influence in the islands until 1824, when colonial civil officer Adrianus Bik visited them as part of Governor-General Baron van der Capellen's tour of the Maluku region (Oliver, 1837).

Adrianus Johannes Bik had previously been employed by the Prussian-born Botanist, C.G.C. Reinwardt, in 1821 on his expedition aboard the English brig *Experiment* to collect information on the natural history of the islands and to renew contacts with the islanders after a long pause following the disbandment of the VOC (Maronier, 1967; Bruyns, 2019). After a brief period of employment alongside his brother J.T. Bik as a draughtsman for the botanist, he was specifically dispatched by the colonial state from Batavia to revive Dutch colonial rule in the Maluku (Bruyns,

2019). While it is tempting to interpret this renewed contact as a natural continuation of earlier interactions and to see the return in a one-dimensional way as “inevitable European encroachment”, it is important to understand the return of this contact not as a continuous, uninterrupted connection, but rather one of lag and slippages that come with the ebb and flow akin to the sea waves, with ebb and flow.

As the growing trade discussed in the previous chapter brought with it the movement of both goods and people across a range of commercial centers, it formed an interconnected web that tied the Aru Islands to the broader emerging markets beyond their coastline. Simultaneously, the long shadow of European presence in the region began to resurface, most notably through a series of surveys conducted into the Arafura Sea as mentioned above. During the initial re-establishment of contact by official Dutch surveyors, an air of animosity and an ambiguous standing toward the burgeoning trade in Aru was strongly reflected in their recollections. Trade was viewed with suspicion and was inherently illicit, as it breeds unmonitored movement throughout the colony’s vast waters.

Within this well-established Aru ecosystem, in 1824, Bik was immediately confronted with issues prevalent there. He had received complaints from Chinese and Makassarese traders about a conflict between the villages of Wamar and Wasir (Ujir), which had disrupted local Aruese trepang harvesting and trade (Bik, 1928 [1824]). Initially, both villages were reported to have jointly attacked and punished a neighboring village. However, during the battle, Wasir retreated, leaving Wamar to suffer greatly. This created the conflict that eventually turned the villages against each other. Wasir, through its alliance with some of the Backshore *negeri*, was able to prevent Wamar from bringing a third of the trepang and bird nests it had previously supplied to the market in Dobo

(Bik, 1928 [1824]). The village of Wokam offered to mediate the conflict, but reconciliation efforts stalled due to additional demands Wasir made on Wamar (Bik, 1928 [1824]).

This disruption reduced trepang trade volume to just 1,400–1,600 *pikol*¹¹ in general (Bik, 1928 [1824]). In more specific terms, Bik also reported that Makassarese and Chinese merchants in the villages complained about the reduced catch to only 180 *pikol* trepang, as opposed to the usual 350 or more *pikol* (Bik, 1928 [1824]). It is important to underscore that this decline was made without any reference to Bik's earlier records. Nevertheless, alongside trepang, the pearl oysters, which were typically collected from the Backshore, were also reported to have declined. The number of villagers willing to trade them decreased due to the ongoing hostility (Bik, 1928 [1824]). Bik noted that during his travels to the Backshore villages of Aparu, the "pearl bank had completely disappeared, and they had not fished for two years—except for larger shells suitable for the Chinese market" (Bik, 1928 [1824]). In addition to the drop in the amount of trepang and pearl shell harvested, the Makassarese reported that cargo storage of these products in Dobo was occasionally burned by Ujir attackers, further deterring trade in Aru's Backshore (Bik, 1928 [1824]).

In the eyes of the colonial government, such attacks posed more than just material losses for the Makassarese. The disruptions in the trepang and pearl oyster trades reinforced the Dutch understanding that commercial activity was key to maintaining influence in Aru. More importantly, these events affirmed their belief that peaceful relations between the Frontshore and Backshore Aruese *negeri* were essential for upholding the colonial idea of *rust en orde* (Peace and Order). The maintenance of this ideology cannot be relegated to hands of the Aruese, as Bik

¹¹ The pikol (pikul) is equivalent to 136lb or 61 – 76 kg (Caldwell, 2012).

recount his encounter with a Makassarese merchant who described the way of resolving disputes in Aru “arose from their strong inclination to arak, from which each one drinks until all are drunk”, while the Makassarese merchants were forced to shut themselves in their temporary housing where their goods were stored (Bik, 1928 [1824]). The bedrock of such logic then had to be maintained through the continuation of certain political practices inherited from their predecessors, the VOC.

The colonial state harbored deep suspicions about unregulated trade and mobility, a legacy of the VOC era. Movements of Sulawesi-origin traders into the Backshore of Aru, dating back to the 17th century, were met with distrust. Dutch authorities viewed these traders as insufficiently loyal to the VOC monopoly centered in the island of Banda (Hägerdal, 2020) and had previously attempted to ban Makassarese trade, branding them as “smugglers” during the Company’s decline in the 1780s (Hägerdal, 2019). These efforts only escalated tensions between the Dutch and the Aruese. Although the Aru Islands retained trading ties with Banda, this did not imply political loyalty to the Bandanese. Banda itself was not a state and exercised no political authority beyond its shores (Ellen, 2003). This enduring suspicion was aptly described by Eric Tagliacozzo as a “kettle on a slow boil,” reflecting Batavia’s unease over its porous, uncontrolled colonial borders, which grew in salience as it approached the end of the nineteenth century (Tagliacozzo 2000). This mindset helps understand how the colonial state exercised its authority and mediated disputes in the region.

To address the Aru conflict, Bik adopted a conciliatory approach reminiscent of the VOC. He began by inviting representatives of the conflicting parties—Wokam and Wasir, the *Orang Kaya*¹²

¹² Orang Kaya is a title used by various Southern Moluccan to refer to the traditional leader of a village who had attained authority by the manipulation of resources, and exclusive, although not mutually exclusive, to a person who acquired influence by virtue of becoming a middleman in the commodity trade and communicating with foreign merchants. (Ellen, 1986).

of the conflicting parties—to mediate on board the Dutch brig *Daphne*. This meeting included *Orang Kaya* from Meykor and an *Orang Tua*¹³ from Tanavel (Bik 1928 [1824]). Holding the meeting aboard a Dutch vessel reflected a more controlled and cautious approach, especially considering the last time a VOC *posthouder* (postholder) was killed while visiting a village to mediate a conflict in the 1790s (Gordon, Djonler, Hägerdal, 2019). In addition to mediating the conflict between the two villages in the manner of the VOC, Bik also appointed several *Orang Kaya* and *Orang Tua* during his visit to the Backshore. He recorded that the Backshore still addressed him and his party as *Toean Kompeni*, a reference to the earlier visits by the VOC (Bik, 1928 [1824]).

In the village of Aparā, he encountered the sons of the previous *Orang Kaya* and *Orang Tua*, then subsequently appointed both as the new leaders representing the Dutch Government. Again, echoing the VOC’s earlier attempts to communicate abstract ideas of “illegality,” Bik emphasized the impossibility for the Aruese to live peacefully and securely in possession of their property—or indeed to maintain any form of social order—without the lawful leadership of a government (Bik, 1928 [1824]). The procession ended with Bik handing over formal documents, linen gifts, and a Dutch flag to the chiefs, accompanied by a ceremonial gun salute from the sailors (Bik, 1928 [1824]). This act of gift-giving in exchange for political capital was reminiscent of the VOC’s own practices in the islands during the height of its presence in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

¹³ Similar title incorporated by the Dutch administration for a designated leader, usually of religious capacity, of a certain village (Ellen, 1986).

In many cases, the VOC would also erect a stone or wooden pillar to commemorate such a contract (Hägerdal, 2019).

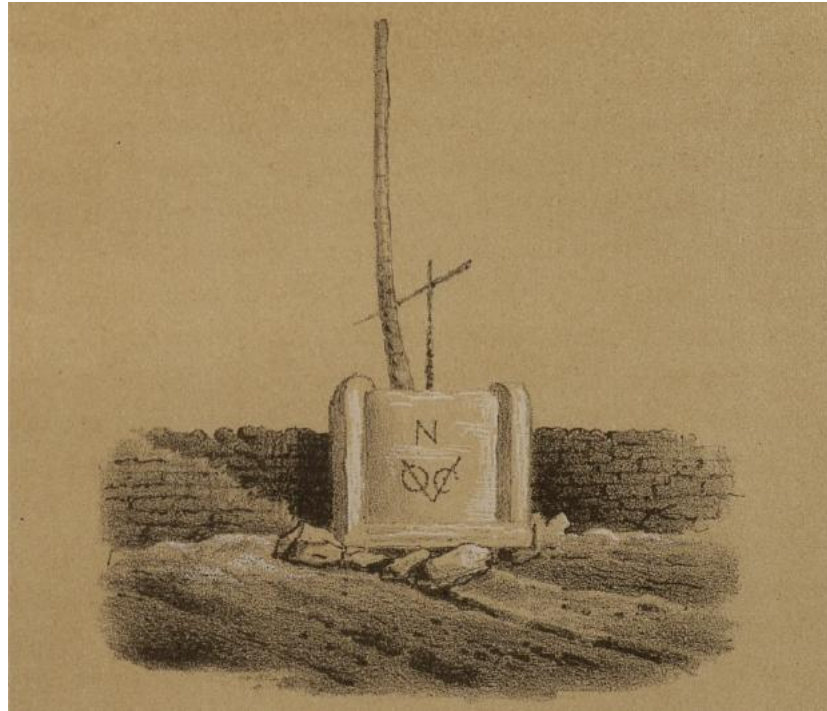


IMAGE 7. A STONE MARKER IN THE ISLAND OF KOOR (KUR) BETWEEN SERAM AND KAI IN 1865. SOMETHING SIMILAR MUST HAVE BEEN ERECTED IN ARU DURING THE TIME OF THE VOC. SOURCE: VON ROZENBERG, 1865.

During the meeting, Bik warned that if internal conflict persisted, the villagers could expect neither peace nor prosperity, nor any goodwill from the present government. Instead, he cautioned, they would face stern consequences from the powerful Governor-General in Batavia (Bik, 1928 [1824]). This rhetoric served a dual purpose: not only did it reinforce the image of the Dutch colonial state as a benevolent yet authoritative arbiter, but it also made clear that violence and disorder would jeopardize the economic benefits tied to the islands' colonial cooperation. By invoking the authority of the Governor-General—a figure far removed from the Aruese daily life—Bik amplified the symbolic distance and hierarchical nature of colonial power, signaling that local disputes could attract intervention from the upper hierarchy of imperial governance.

He further reminded the assembled leaders that the Goramers, long-time traders in the area, had begun to dominate trade along Aru's Backshore from the influences of Wokam and Wasir (Bik, 1928 [1824]) and used this reference to outside competitors, as a warning and a veiled ultimatum: continued internal conflict would not only attract punitive measures from the colonial administration but would also leave the Aruese vulnerable to displacement by more organized and opportunistic trading groups, a reference to the expanding Makassarese and Chinese traders in the area. In this way, Bik linked local peace to broader geopolitical and commercial calculations, framing reconciliation not as a matter of justice or tradition, but as a necessary strategy for survival in a changing world.

But as can be seen, by portraying Dutch mediation as the only viable path to stability and prosperity, Bik embedded the colonial presence more deeply into Aru's political fabric. The absent presence of the state, personified by the kingly specter of the Governor General, leaves an interesting mark to be seen. However, this presence remained performative and contingent upon the Aruese's tolerance so long as it served their interests. The Dutch were not so much rulers as arbiters whose legitimacy rested on their ability to deliver security, resolve disputes, and maintain balance among competing interests. This negotiation of authority reflects the broader dynamics of colonial governance in the peripheries: a constant balancing act between coercion and accommodation, projection, and performance, where "peace" was not a natural state but a condition that had to be continually staged and enforced. The participation of the Aruese depicted in this source should not be read as a sign of blind loyalty of a passive colonial subject to the Dutch. Rather, it reflects their understanding of the Dutch as "Stranger Kings"—foreign authorities whose rule was recognized in specific, strategic contexts (Hägerdal, 2019). This relationship can be seen as the Aruese effort to use a third-party power to help them negotiate their own disputes

or conflicts, and thus is by no means a sign of concrete submissiveness. But as the Dutch state began to consolidate, this form of deliberation increasingly became a one-sided imposition on the Aruese.

As Bik's survey cemented the Dutch colonial state's continued effort to enter the political scene in Aru, a later survey was conducted in 1825. This time, by Dirk Hendrik Kolff, a colonial naval officer born and brought up in a naval family. At 14, under the command of his father aboard the war frigate *Van der Werff*, Kolff had become a midshipman and by 1818 had joined a Dutch expedition to the Maluku islands of Ceram and Saparua to quell "unrest" by "smugglers" and "pirates" that had supplied the islanders with gunpowder and ammunition to fight against the Dutch (Hongings, 2021). After a brief military campaign against Sultan Mahmud Badaruddin of Palembang, Sumatra, he was promoted to lieutenant first class and a commander of the brig *Dourga* (Hongings, 2021). His military career was certainly evident in his description of the political situation in Aru in 1825.

Aboard the Dutch brig *Dourga*, Kolff recounted several continuing observations. Unlike the previous report by Bik, D.H. Kolff made an interesting remark about the presence of traders and the Dutch in the Aru Islands. Concerning the Makassarese and Buginese merchants, Kolff went further than Bik, labeling them as nothing more than "extortioners" and "plunderers" rather than friendly traders, due to the prolonged absence of Dutch control and Christian missionaries in the islands (Kolff, 1876 [1825]). He also made similar remarks when visiting the village of Wadia, where, supposedly, the Makassarese had tricked the indigenous Aruese into distrusting the colonial government. This situation raised concerns about the need for a permanent Dutch postholder in Aru (Kolff, 1876 [1825]). At that point, Kolff even entertained the idea of establishing a Dutch

fort at Dobo, moving from an old, abandoned Company era fort in the island of Wokam, arguing with the fort, it could soon be a “very prosperous trading place”, where were a representative of the Dutch state to reside there, it harbor would “never be without vessels” (Kolff, 1876 [1825]).

Kolff again came to the Aru Islands, continuing the practice of gift-giving that seems almost obligatory. Just as the colorfully adorned perahu of the local *orang kaya*, adorned with triangular flags of various colors, this display of significance was also part of Dutch gift-giving. By giving away a colorfully golden or silver-tipped cane, an array of cloth, and the tricolor Dutch flag, it reinstates the message of recognition of Dutch power. This, in turn, came to be understood in an Aruese term as a strategic relationship that showcases the Aruese's assertiveness in receiving and using the Dutch as a legitimate-bearing presence for their own social position. In one interesting instance, when he appointed an Aruese elder by the name of Bernard Herman to be the “Upper *Orang Kaya*” from the predominately Chrisitan *negeri* of Wokam, he was compelled to also promise one *orang kaya* of Wadia which had ‘considerably jealousy’ over his Herman appointment that he also requested to be given the same honor and thus, entail with it a similar level of influence (Kolff, 1876 [1825]).

A particular aspect of interest is the militaristic presence introduced into the gift-giving. More than just a legitimate political move, it also manifested in the projection of physical power and the subtle threat of military intervention. During one of Kolff’s reports, on one of his many occasions hosting dinner on board the Dutch warship, he had heard that the Aruese had never been on a warship before. His response was to immediately fire the guns of the ship, in which he reported that “they were terribly frightened ... jump into the air at every shot, like harlequins” (Kolff, 1876 [1825]). He continued that plenty of them jumped overboard while others would hide themselves

under the table or in any corner they could find (Kolff, 1876 [1825]). During Kolff's visit, part of his gifts always involved firearms and rifle firing. Just as Bik had done during his time in Apra, Kolff was also greeted with gunfire from Wokam, which was answered by the Dutch war brig (Kolff, 1876 [1825]).

On another occasion, in his journey in the *negeri* of Wadia – situated on the northwestern side of the Aru Islands – was full of such militaristic display. During the first encounter, after the *orang tua* of the Wadia request Kolff to disembark and visit their place, he sent 26 armed men on shore early in the morning to secure the path by following a local river to the house of the *orang kaya* (Kolff, 1876 [1825]). During his approach to the river, seven shots were fired from a one-pounder gun, which had to be taken off the brig. Alongside the gun, several saluting shots were also fired by the Aruese with their *lelahs*¹⁴ while displaying several Dutch flags. This interesting display of gunship and gun power presents the landing and meeting of Kolff as both administrative and militaristic. Again, nodding to its previous invocation by Bik on the presence of the far-distant Governor-General. This gesture would then be contrasted with Kolff's announcement to the *negeri* of the “philanthropic and humane object of [the] government” (Kolff, 1876 [1825]).

As we continue towards the 1850s, the frequency of this survey increased and became even more pervasive in colonial state projects. In particular, it became logical to address the issue stemming from significant trade growth prompted by the surge in marine-harvested resources. In 1856, the Assistant Resident at Amboina, Bosscher, called for greater attention to the Aru Islands. In a letter dated February 15, 1856, to the Dutch Governor of the Moluccas in Ambon, Bosscher explicitly stated that a visit to the islands was necessary, citing the growing presence of “foreign

¹⁴ Seems to be some type of small hand-held cannon.

traders” of Sulawesi origin¹⁵. He quoted directly from a Governor General’s directive dated September 7, 1848, No. 246, which required the Dutch colonial authorities to conduct annual visits to the islands with a warship, stressing that several islands need constant visits as there is a strong possibility that neglect will lead to unrest and disputes¹⁶. Consequently, he dispatched his junior officer, Helsdingen, to travel to the islands in 1856 aboard the Dutch war brig *Rembang*¹⁷. This repeated anxiety and unpredictable conditions led to repeated military intervention and direct state presence in the islands, that is, by the end of the nineteenth century, as a recurring symptom of failure of the Dutch colonial state. It pushed for actions and intentions that would betray the supposed protectionist intention of the Dutch presence in the islands.

The imagination of the metropole was thus created through encounters and centuries-long practices installed by the Dutch officers’ predecessors. One where the act of summoning, hosting dinner, landing on the beach, and donning a costume for deliberation, and the colorful gifts to prove ‘loyalty’ are all orchestrated accordingly and with an almost theatrical level of precision. In this act of being present during their rather long absence, the Dutch officers imbued the items with spirit, dedicated to bringing not only symbols of allegiance to Batavia and the even farther Netherlands, but also serving as a watchful symbol of the Governor General. And this presence is invoked and given significance through its co-dependent existence with the Dutch officers who came with them. Almost like the sea waves that brought them to the Aruese shores, the colonial state and its arms of bureaucratic-military officers are in the realm of memory once the flagstaff of their warship disappeared on the horizon.

¹⁵ Letter No. 2, C. Bosscher 15 February 1856. *Amboina No. 1462*. Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Letter No. 2, 22 February 1856. *Amboina No. 1462*. Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI).

As important as colonial spectacles like the tricolor Dutch flag or rifles and canes, the physical presentations by colonial officers imbued these colonial objects with ‘spirit’. The physical presence of Bik or Kolff – and throughout the rest of the nineteenth century – was there to preserve the memories of the old VOC or *Kompeni* and to promote their bodies as a true personification of the metropole. Yet this personification does not entail any immediate power or relevance until the Dutch officer found it necessary to invoke the presence of the Governor General. The personified presence of the state was brought to the fringes not to reaffirm the supposed unending loyalty of the Aruese – as the words engraved in the *rottingknappen* suggest – but to convince the visiting officer’s imagination that the metropole is alive and well, working for their advantage in the actual absence of the state.

II. Shattering of *Zaman Belanda*

“A long time ago , they said , some strangers came to Aru , and came here to Wanumbai , and the chief of the Wanumbai people did not like them , and wanted them to go away ; but they would not go , and so it came to fighting , and many Aru men were killed, and some, along with the chief , were taken prisoners , and carried away by the strangers . Some of the speakers, however, said that he was not carried away, but went away in his own boat to escape from the foreigners, and went to the sea and never came back again. But they all believe that the chief and the people that went with him still live in some foreign country; and if they could find out where they would send them to come back again”. (Wallace, 1869)

The above quote from Wallace resonates with the shift in the display of power, which had increasingly become one of hostility and physical violence. When the Wanumbaiese men ask Wallace to seek out the missing Wanumbaiese villagers, it speaks of the memories of violence – wherever these strangers might possibly originate – that seems to have been remembered far from the immediate act itself. Echoing the historical record of such violence, the Dutch had been involved as early as the late eighteenth century, particularly when the brother of the rebellious Prince Nuku of Tidore established Aru as a site of military skirmishes (Hägerdal, 2019). It led to

the military expedition to the Aru Islands in 1788-1791, which was mainly aimed at Ujir and their support for this rebellion. Meanwhile, in the famous case of 1794, Batuley was in the middle of an anti-VOC movement, which resulted in the death of a VOC Postholder, named Scheerder (Hägerdal, 2019). While the Wanumbaiese are not in the immediate vicinity of Ujir or Batuley, some areas of the Backshore are also embroiled in this violence. The Wanumbaiese memories are here not to be ignored, but to invoke the recursive momentum of a particularly violent time.

In this sub-chapter, I purposefully use the word “shattering” to metaphorically shatter and disturb *Zaman Belanda* (E. Dutch time or colonial time). Here, the use of *Zaman Belanda* was directly borrowed from a Backshore Wokraiese song, used to remember an important rebellion against the Dutch in 1892 (Spyer, 2000). The name *Zaman Belanda* refers to the literal translation of the Malay word as “The time of the Dutch” or the “Colonial Period”. Patricia Spyer (2000) describes the song as a remembrance of the story of a Backshorese Aruese leader from Longgar, by the name Pukulgore, who was arrested by the colonial authorities. Yet, as the four-stanza songs relay the moment when the colonial authorities arrested him, they marked a moment of silencing amid the colonial state’s expanding power (Spyer, 2000). While the use of the song of remembrance itself shatters the supposed silence the Dutch employed to assert their control over the islands, the *Zaman Belanda* here is used as a reminder of a moment of active resistance against the Dutch.

Therefore, in this thesis, *Zaman Belanda* is not used to blindly accepting the high water mark of colonial documentation, but to complicate and trace the logic of militaristic intervention and physical violence that shook Aru throughout the nineteenth century. Tracing these threads of logic will push us to show that *Zaman Belanda* is not just another façade of peripheral resistance to the

metropole's gaze. Rather, it shows a complex picture of various circumstances arising from an interrelated combination of trade and state-driven initiatives to consolidate its power over Aru. This tension would eventually culminate in an explosion of rapid violence that would reverberate across the islands. Through this complexity, this part seeks to complicate the story of Dutch power away from a notion of inevitability by examining the shifting emotions reflected in their historical fears of influence, amplified through 'unregulated' trade networks.

While trade and the itineraries of pearls have continued to occupy colonial authorities from Batavia, this can only be understood as part of a larger crisis of confidence striking the colonial state. As this situation grew, the Dutch colonial state gradually expanded to formally cement its control in Aru. Eric Tagliacozzo (2015) argues that the processes of co-opting local rulers, building a centralized bureaucracy, and using key trading posts – such as Dobo – to project both military and administrative authority are a precedent towards cementing greater colonial control. For instance, in 1874, Dutch colonial authority began appointing postholders (*posthouder*) to the island of Wokam to permanently provide monitoring and physical presence in the islands (*Regerings-Almanak Voor Nederlandsch-Indië, 1874, Deel, 1874, p. 236*). The placement would change in 1882 to Dobo, as the harbor was strategically situated to control trade in Aru and to serve the small village of Gomo-Gomo on the Backshore island of Batuley (van Hoëvell, 1890). But the story does not start in 1874, 1882, or 1893. Instead, I will be looking at several instances of physical confrontation in the Backshore since the 1850s.

In 1862, the colonial officer H.C. van Eijbergen, under the orders of the Dutch Governor of Maluku, was dispatched to the Aru and Kai Islands to resolve issues and make known the Dutch colonial presence (van Eijbergen, 1862). On his record of the disputes in the *negeri* of Batuley, the

colonial officer van Eijbergen noted, based on the reports of the previous visiting colonial administrator C.H. Bosscher, that an accident had occurred between the Batuleyese and the Makassarese and Buginese traders in 1854. In the year, Batuley and another *negeri* Kumul imposed a fine of around 29,389 pieces of pearl shells for their outstanding original debt with the traders – estimated to have been around 24,737 pieces – in addition to another 4,652 pieces of pearl shells as a punishment for burning the perahu of 3 other traders residing there. Estimating the price of mother-of-pearl at that time, which was around *f*70/pikol¹⁸ the total fine should be around *f*34,000 (van Eijbergen, 1862). His findings showed that, as of 1859, the payment had stopped, with around 25,000 mother-of-pearls still unpaid, while 6 of the 25 original traders had passed away, and 10 others had returned to Makassar and never returned to Aru (van Eijbergen, 1862).

Within such circumstances, he summoned the main creditor, Lauke, along with Balangon, Masja, Adjang, and Moharam, and gave them a speech ordering them to quit their practice in order to find future transactions to be plentiful, “honesty and good loyalty” from the Aruese (van Eijbergen, 1862). While the speech might be read as Dutch concern for the wellbeing of the Aruese, in their eyes, it was a simple practicality of putting distance between the “illegal” traders and honest Aruese - ignoring their long-shared history of contact and commerce. In response to such credit practices, Bosscher apparently banned the Makassarese money lenders from establishing their practices in the Backshore (van Eijbergen, 1862). But by 1862, this policy did not work, as van Eijbergen noted during his visit to Dobo that the infamous Lauke was still active in Batuley, alongside Laebo, who had established himself in the Backshore *negeri* of Gomo-Gomo (van Eijbergen, 1862). Instead of imposing another ban, van Eijbergen decided that a commission from the traders would monitor their money-lending practices. Simultaneously, he was also

¹⁸ 1 pikol averages about 60 pieces of mother-of-pearls (van Eijbergen, 1862).

concerned with the growing number of Chinese traders who had brought with them gambling habits that, in his eyes, could potentially befall the Aruese (van Eijbergen, 1862).

On the other hand, the Dutch officer also noted that there is a growing sign of an animated spirit of resistance against the Makassarese and Buginese traders (van Eijbergen, 1862). This spirit, when fully enacted, was not welcomed by the Dutch officer. In the same year of 1862, another routine inspection was conducted by the Assistant Resident of Amboina, Petrus van der Crab, for the visiting Governor General Charles Ferdinand Pahud (1862). Van der Crab, who visited Batuley, noted that the remoteness of Aru had been a deterrent for so many years. Resulting from the “evil nature of the natives” and with the deaths of the VOC soldiers that had “fallen victim to the vindictive nature of the Aruese” (van der Crab, 1862), van Eijbergen, who had described the nature of the Aruese to be full of honesty or fairness (*D. Eerlijkheid*). Again, promoting his disdain for the presence of the Makassarese traders who have risen to become “masters of trade” by putting themselves as the sole source for goods coming into Aru. Yet in his understanding, this outside influence only weakened the Aruese, and an adequate spread of civilization can only be brought with an organized minutiae control by a European officer in charge of the goods brought to the islands (van der Crab, 1862).

Van der Crab, again, just like the previous imperial agents, noticed that the practice of money lending seems to have burdened the Aruese. But, within his response, was a call to exert more of the state’s influence over the islands. In 1853, a dispute between Batuley and the traders – mostly Buginese – had reached a boiling point. A fire, which had started somewhere in the village, quickly spread throughout the *negeri* and, in response, Batuley destroyed the Bugisse trading vessels and killed 2 traders, deterring other traders from coming to its shores (van der Crab, 1862).

Immediately afterward, they had practically retreated to the forest and ceased all diving activities at their pearling banks. The Buginese, instead of retaliating, had come to Wokam, where the Dutch officer – presumably Bosscher – sent troops to Batuley to capture and send the three ‘agitators’ to jail (van der Crab, 1862).

While this event was explained as the main cause of the outstanding debt in 1862, four years after the original expulsion, in 1857, Batuley still exerted significant control over the pearling banks. In their attempt to deter such practices, Batuleyese have allied themselves with another *negeri* by the name of Dosie, which sits near the mouth of a *Sungai*¹⁹ and have given Dosie permission to stop and plunder any ships that pass through their *sungai*. Van der Crab (1862) afterward recorded that 6 Goramese merchants were reported murdered on their way to trade in the Backshore. This only further deteriorates the trading situation in the Backshore (van der Crab, 1862). This tension peaked in the month of April of 1859, when the Dutch corvette *Pallas* was sent alongside several Dutch military personnel to investigate and brought responsibility to Batuley for killing the Makassarese traders (van der Crab, 1862; “Binnenland”, Nieuw Amsterdam Handels- en Effectbladen, 1860).

During their visit, the Dutch military personnel aboard *Pallas* were not allowed to investigate the situation, and the Batuleyese refused to come to the ships. Afterward, it was reported that some Batuley villagers, who seemed to have been under the influence of alcohol, threatened the officers with their weapons (van der Crab, 1862). Now, with the weapons turned against the Dutch, they sent the full might of the corvette and, in an act that they claimed to be in the nature of “self-defense” (D. *zelfverdediging*), fired their guns against the village until, among the ruins, one of the

¹⁹ Saltwater channels running east to west separate the main archipelago with narrow and shallow openings on each side. The term *Sungai* originates from the Malay word for rivers.

orang kaya of Batuley can be seen surrendering to the Dutch military (van der Crab, 1862). In the resulting aftermath, two of their *negeri* leaders were brought to jail alongside the confiscation of their weapons (van der Crab, 1862). This has left a lasting imprint on the Backshore. After decades of non-confrontation with the Dutch after the dissolution of the VOC, violence once again returned. Interestingly, on the report made by the newspaper *Rotterdamsche Courant*, trading seasons in 1864 were reported to have declined further than before, and van Eijbergen, who was appointed at that time, reported that the number of products hailed from the Backshore turned out ‘weak’ (“Kolonien”, *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 1862; von Rozenberg, 1865).

This change of atmosphere was reflected in van Eijbergen’s visit of 1864, when he noted that his presence was greeted not with curiosity by Batuley. Instead, the atmosphere was rife with anxiousness during his meeting with several *orang kaya* in the Backshore – namely *orang tua* Kalipita, Surpul, Omong Omong, and Mailo (van Eijbergen, 1864). It was explained that van Eijbergen did not visit Batuley because the colonial state decided to chastise the *negeri* after an attempted rebellion in 1859. The sight of the Dutch was seen as a harbinger of danger, and the incoming Dutch were offered a pair of mother-of-pearl shells freshly dived a few moments before their arrival (van Eijbergen, 1864). Even the women and children had fled to the forests at the sight of the Dutch war brig (van Eijbergen, 1864).

This concern about the pearling situation resurfaced after van Eijbergen had ordered Batuley to pay the old debt to the traders (van Eijbergen, 1864). During his meeting, he made a remark that it is within his power not to punish them for their failure to pay the outstanding debt. This subtle remark gestures to the memory of 1859, when the presence of a Dutch officer was not to be disturbed, for within him lies a power that can summon the gunpowder fire of the Dutch warships.

This threat of firepower, however, did not help bring the trade that the Dutch were so vehemently protecting against the disruptions caused by the traders. Instead, within this anxious moment, a growing tension also began to hold in the pearling banks. The *orang kaya* of Batuley, Omong Omong, had complained to van Eijbergen that the pearling banks had been exhausted, and that divers from Ujir on the island of Jedan had caused significant competition for pearl oysters (van Eijbergen, 1864). Unfortunately for Omol Omol, the 5 soas²⁰ have not unanimously agreed to act in this situation.

Meanwhile, conflicts between traders and Aruese seem to have sprung up from the resulting atmosphere. The Makassarese and Buginese traders have since returned to Batuley, and with the presence of the infamous moneylender Lauke, trade has been in decline. Another report of strife between a Buginese man named Basta and the Aruese of Missidan on the island of Kulur also reached van Eijbergen. The incident was reported to involve a quarrel between the two parties after the latter damaged the former vegetable garden. In which a subsequent brawl happened, resulting in the death of 2 Aruese men (van Eijbergen, 1864). Laibo, the head of the Buginese trader, had salvaged Basta's junk alongside his own, which had been abandoned by Basta after the fight. He was then ordered by van Eijbergen to bring the items to Dobo for public sale, with the proceeds used to pay off the debt owed to Missidan (van Eijbergen, 1864).

As noted by van der Crab (1862), the general Dutch commercial presence in Aru has been steadily dwarfed by that of Makassar, Buginese, and, recently, Chinese, due to the decline of the Dutch East India Company in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Despite the setback caused by the Dutch, trade in pearl oysters and other goods from Makassar continues steadily. In 1870,

²⁰ A smaller unit within a *negeri*.

the *Javasche Courant* reported that the Aru Islands managed to export around 5 tons of goods, of which around f250,000 worth of pearl oysters were fished, with around f100/pikol, a significant price jump from the one in 1854 (“Binnenlandsche Berichten”, *Javasche Courant*, 1870). However, the increasing trade was also met with continued Dutch attempts at greater control, including attempting to curb imports of opium, which they believed would hinder trade – An idea that had been floated since the 1860s (van der Berg, 1862; “Koloniaal Verslag”, *De Locomotief*, 1872).

One of the growing interests of the Dutch authorities in the Aru Islands was in 1876, when P.C.L. Hartog from Surabaya, representing a trading company, embarked on Maluku with his steamship the *Egeron* in order to establish the potential for expanding trade in the area (“De Moluksche Archipel”, *Algemeen Handelsblad*, 1876). In his own journal, the expedition was tasked with exploring a possible new route for the Dutch royal package shipping company, KPM (*Koninklijk Paketvaart Maatschappij*), since they hadn’t thoroughly mapped the area (Hartog, 1875). It is clear from his writing that Hartog believed that trade, under the Dutch’s guiding control, would foster colonial civic-communality, establishing a strong base for the colonial state. He advocates stronger European control over the pearling banks in Aru and the establishment of a long-distance trade relationship between Java and Aru through his method of “*Trekhandel*”. This ‘pull trade’ is largely envisioned as the establishment of a permanent settlement of coming-and-going merchants in Aru, without any seasonal interruptions (Hartog, 1875).

His expedition was in clear resonance with the milieu at that time. Conducted at a time of heightened Dutch presence in the area, the Royal Dutch Navy began conducting a routine check of its warships in the 1870s, looping around the islands from the Frontshore to the Backshore

(*Jaarboek van de Koninklijke Nederlandsche Zeemagt*, 1875; 1880). Both to conduct hydrographic surveys around Aru and to immediately project a permanent physical presence in the islands, masquerading as protection against foreign intruders. Especially as issues with American ships in the area and British and German presence in the nearby island of Papua add to the mounting tension in Aru (“Amerika”, *Tilburgsche Courant*, 1885; “Nieuw Guinea”, *Dagblad van Zuidholland en ‘s Gravenhage*, 1886)

In the instability promoted by the Dutch, the situation in Aru began to tense, leading to multiple open acts of opposition against increasing Dutch control. Just as the Dutch naval ship *De Sourabaija* suffered damage by the wind and sea near the mouth of a river canal in Aru, so does the pervasive image of an uninterrupted Dutch presence. This would eventually culminate in the highly transformative 1892–1893 uprising, during which one of the villagers from the Backshore Island of Workai led a rebellion by attacking foreign traders along the Backshore, culminating in a dramatic assault on the port of Dobo in late 1892 (“Verslag Der Onlusten Op de Aroc-Eilanden,” *De Locomotief*, 1893).

This eruption of violence was not an isolated incident. Rather, it was the latest in a series of nativist movements that had emerged in the region since the early 1880s, as a series of colonial policies began to exert control over pearling. This series of policies shows one side of the complexity of the situation in Aru in these later years of the nineteenth century. While trade with merchants from Sulawesi has been an ongoing issue for the Dutch post in Maluku, the arrival of the Australians posed another threat to Dutch colonial rule in Eastern Indonesia. Amid the tension already underway due to Dutch violent repression in Backshore Aru, Australians began moving to Aru in the 1870s – 1880s to fish for pearls as they expanded their operating grounds from Northern

Australia. Interestingly, their own curiosity arose after Wallace published his findings in *The Malay Archipelago* in 1869.

Amid this intense complexity of colonial rivalry and the intensifying pearling trade, in 1882, a former pearl diver named Belbel initiated a spiritual resistance movement, drawing on visions and dreams to mobilize residents of several Backshore villages to expel outsiders and restore ancestral order. The then Resident of Amboina describes the rebellion as coming from Aruese “superstition”, with Belbel having successfully convinced the villages that he can communicate with the ancestral spirits (Hoëvell, 1890). A similar episode took place between 1885 and 1887, led by another pearl diver named Naelaer from Meriri, convinced the *negeri* of Meriri, Lola, and parts of Kobror to disobey the Dutch – without any particular reasoning – by convincing them to replace the tricolor Dutch flag with a white flag (Hoëvell, 1890). The Dutch military then sent the warships *Java* and *Semarang* to quell the rebellion, and by 1887, Naelar was captured, while *negeri* Meriri was punished severely, before it was rebuilt by 1888 (Hoëvell, 1890).

These revolts were understood, at least through the eyes of van Hoëvell, as driven by superstitious intent and its relevance to the pearling trade in the islands. In his own description of the Aruese belief, he emphasizes the importance of spirits in catching the pearl oyster. Even so far as highlighting a spirit by the name of *Waer Kola*, which had to be pleased by bringing gifts before any ships could tread the waters to fish any pearls (Hoëvell, 1890). The fact that most rebellions start in the Backshore and often involve a pearl diver has put the oysters at the center of the conflict. This entanglement with the expanding pearling only serves to ferment a landscape of state violence, starting in the 1850s with Batuley, which has only grown in escalation and scale. This would then make way for the larger, more coordinated rebellion of 1892–1893, which involved

prominent figures from across the Backshore—Toelfoeloen of Krei, Wainaka, and Djerman from Batuley, Goerier from Apari, and others such as Marwai and Bairoki (Spyer, 2000).

Toelfoeloen, regarded as the leader of the movement similar to Naelar, invoked spiritual dreams as justification for the uprising. On one day of the rebellion, in the middle of November 1892, an annual travel conducted by the Resident of Amboina, from the main city port of Ambon, interrupted their usual journey with a news: that the Postholder had gave the information for the Resident, that the a series of riots and uprising had happened in September and October of that year, from the villages in the Backshore (*Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indie*, 1894). Happening concurrently, as reported in the colonial newspaper *Java-Bode* on November 26, 1892, a number of Makassarese or Buginese traders were killed by some sort of “fanatics” (D. Geestdrijver) movement originating in Aru (“Telegrammen”, *Java-Bode*, 1892). As violence escalated—including the death of 23 Makassarese and 3 Chinese traders—the Dutch launched a full-scale military response, targeting Barakai as the rebellion’s stronghold with the warships *Java* and *Arend* (“Telegrammen”, *Java Bode*, 1892).

The Resident at that time, D. Heijting, who had already been appointed since 25 June 1883 (*Regeerings Almanak*, 1891), was bound by his duties to the state, suspended all of his inspection travels, and dispatched the warship *Arend* to Dobo, alongside one detachment of military personnel, consisting of 1 officer, 40 *bajonetten* (rifleman), 1 medical officer, 2 medical personnel, and 12 forced laborers (*Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indie*, 1894). Toelfoeloen was described as having “convinced” his fellow Aruese in rebelling against the “established authority” of the Dutch through his invocation of the power of the sea. Alongside his claimed ability to use crocodilians in the islands as weapons to attack the Dutch invaders, his own personal background as a pearl

diver raises an interesting question about the way the Aruese sea holds a key source of power (Pala, 1894; *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indie* Vol. 22, 1893). The rebelling *negeri*, mostly located in the Backshores, targeted any non-Aruese element they could think of in relation to the waters of the islands.

The motivation to gather the men in the Backshore *negeri* of Krei, Batuley, Apari, and Koba, reflected the clear pattern of anti-establishment movement that had swept the Backshore *negeri* of Lola and Meriri earlier in 1887 (*Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indie* Vol. 22, 1893). After the massacre had driven out the Makassarese and Chinese from the three Backshore *negeri*, he then gathered around 85 perahu to attack Dobo, the site of the Dutch postholder. In their act of defiance, the rebels flew the Dutch flag upside down, discarded their colonial insignia, and tore apart official agreements with the government—symbolically rejecting Dutch authority (Spyer, 2000). The *Posthouder*, with the assistance of others in Wamar, was able to defend Dobo with 15 Makassarese ships borrowed from the head villages of Durjela and Wangil (*Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indie* Vol. 22, 1893).

After successfully repelling the Backshore alliance attack, the government warship *Arend* set their eyes on the rebelling *negeri*. On December 28, they set course for the *negeri* of Koemaar – which had been abandoned the previous night – was later burned as retaliation (*Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indie* Vol. 22, 1893). Meanwhile within the next couple of days, small skirmishes took place near Krai, while the *negeri* Meriri had been abandoned, alongside *negeri* Lola and Apari, visibly deserted with the houses being demolished (*Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indie* Vol. 22, 1893). The Dutch warship then decided to land their troops to the *negeri* of Kumul, the Aruese offered a great deal of resistance; abandoning their houses and using a parapet made out of

coral reefs where it was strongly defended, a structure that would be more familiar in the *negeri* of Frontshore, such as Ujir (Schapper, 2019). The defenders, behind the 1- or 1.5-meter-thick barricade landed their enemy with arrows, spears, and rifle fire, while the government troops were stuck within the muddy reefs alongside the naturally high *negeri*, built on top of a rock about 30 feet high (*Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch-Indie* Vol. 22, 1893).

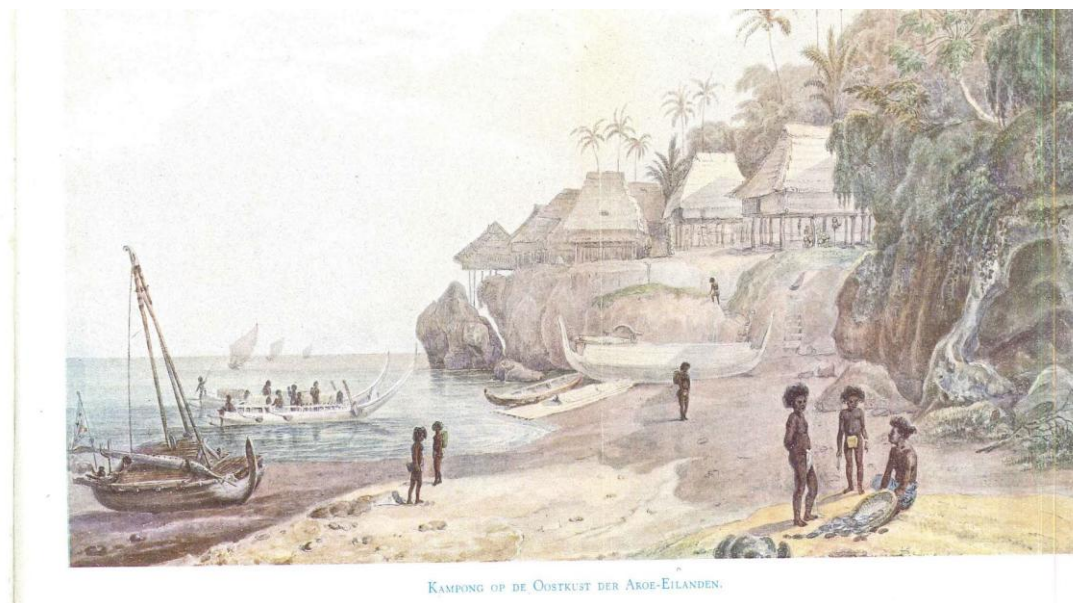


IMAGE 8. A DEPICTION OF A BACKSHORE NEGERI OF THE ARU ISLANDS FROM BIK'S 1824 EXPEDITION. SOURCE: BIK, 1824

While the Dutch military eventually captured Toelfoelen alongside the other leaders and imprisoned them in Ambon, this particular conflict marks a pivotal moment when Aruese resistance, colonial economic ambition, and the assertion of imperial sovereignty collided in the Aru Islands—laying bare the tensions inherent in the project of colonial rule. It shows that Aru, with its slippery runaway topography, becomes a terrain where the metropole fiction of an over-encompassing *rust en orde* slips and falls. Tracing the logic of punishment and chastising of several Backshore *negeri* only revealed the ironic idea of “protection” by the colonial state for the Aruese.

On the contrary, it only serves to show the image of the metropolitan area that had been compromised, and therefore, extreme violence can only be done as a measure to keep the colonial state in its perceived status quo. The expedition that had started with the gunfire of Bosscher's officer's warship in 1850 reverberated deeply in the history of Aru, revealing only the cracks and weaknesses of the colonial state's performative power.

Toelfloen, who was eventually imprisoned in Ambon, was interviewed by a Dutch author named Palas (1894) on his reasons for rebelling against the colonial state, he stood in his chair yelling "*ik heb meer Kracht dan gij, ik zal uwe Kracht verlammen!*" or "I have more power than you, and I you shall cripple your strength!", he then continued to say "*gij zit verlamd! Ik zeg u dat gij niet kunt opstaan! Dat zult ge zien!*", mocking Pala that he could not stand up (*opstaan*) and hinting him of his eventual doom (*zult ge zien*). While this report is most likely to be sensationalized to portray a *geestdrijver* or 'fantics' image to Toelofloen, it can nonetheless be read that, contrary to the firepower used to burn the houses, the Dutch state ultimately failed to break anything and that Toelofloen, alongside the other leaders, was well spirited to return, resisting the Dutch. The portrayal of power that had been done since the 1820s collapsed, and the only logical way for the state to move forward is to cement the memory of the Aruese only ever existing as a 'defeated people' or *orang-orang kalah*. Bound only to the protection of the state that had inadvertently caused more damage and distrust than any traders they have portrayed as "evil, cheating, extortioners and plunderers," depriving Aruese their spirit to live.

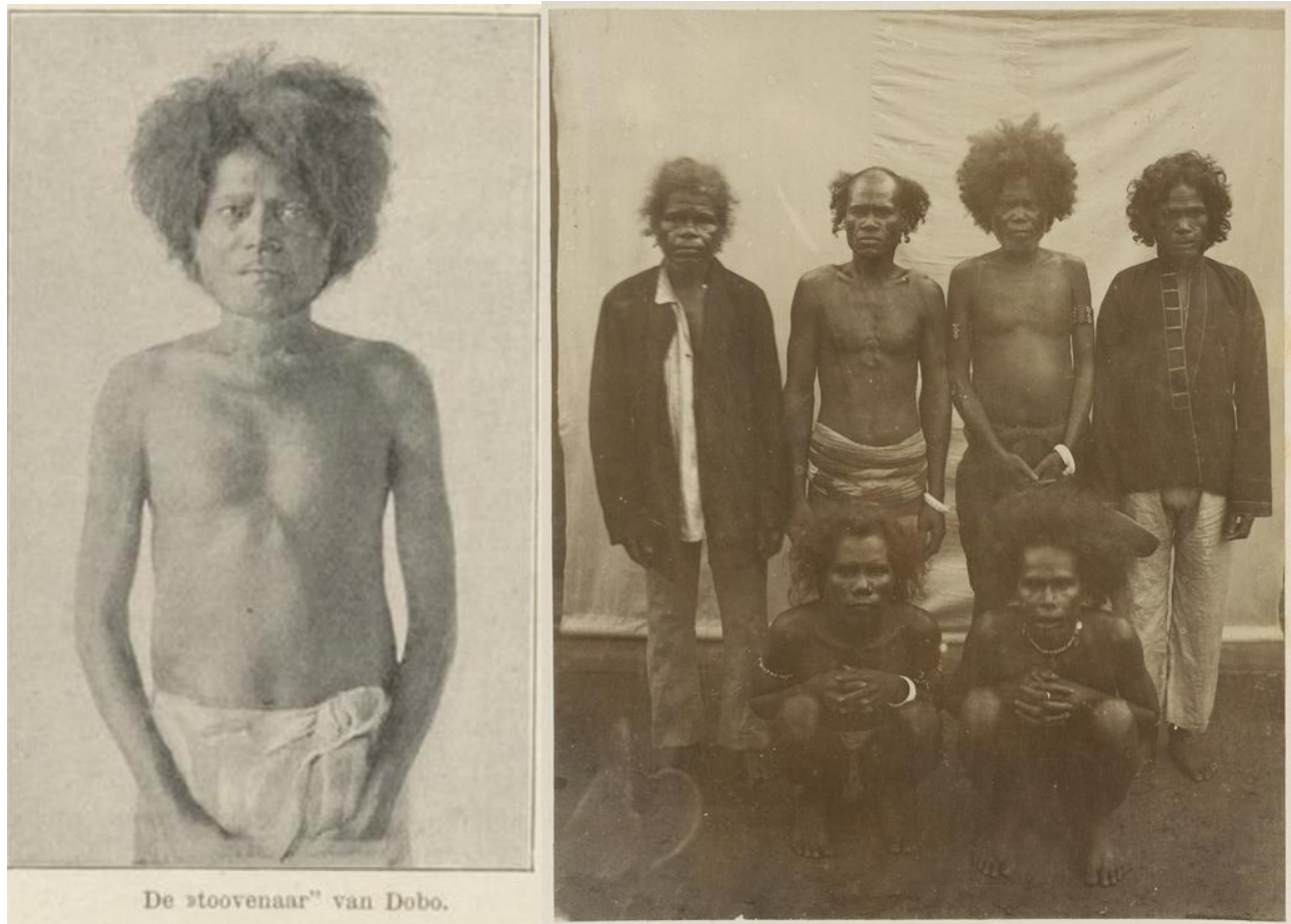


IMAGE 9. ON THE LEFT IS TOELFOELOEN, THE LEADER OF THE REBELLING ARUESE. MEANWHILE THE PICTURE ON THE RIGHT IS THE GROUP OF LEADERS PHOTOGRAPHED AFTER THEIR ARREST IN AMBON. SOURCE: KITLV AND DELPHER.NL

III. Aru Mapped: “*Potret Orang-Orang Kalah*”

I would like to open this part with the reading of a colonial ordinance published in the 1893 *Staatsblad* or Government’s Gazette of the Netherlands Indies no. 261. The ordinance opens up with the subtitle: “Penal provisions for the fishing pearl shells, mother-of-pearls, and trepang without license within the territorial waters of the Netherlands Indies for individuals not belonging to the indigenous population.” (Staatsblad No. 261. 1893). This was then followed by the typical

opening of the ordinance, which transformed the reading into an auditorial experience. It reads, with great confidence, pronouncing its presence as follows:

IN THE NAME OF THE QUEEN!
THE GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE NETHERLANDS INDIES,
The Netherlands Indies council has heard:
To all who shall see or hear this read, Salute!
Do to know:

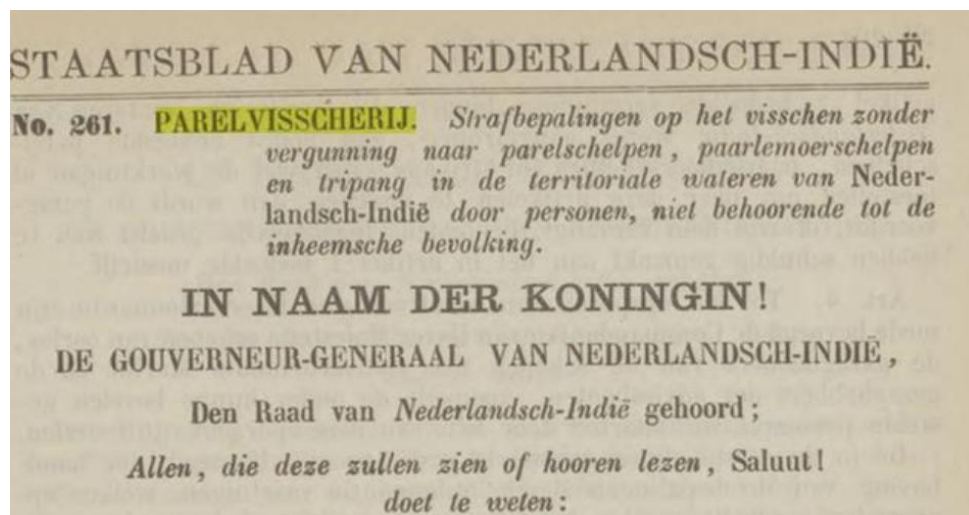


IMAGE 10. THE OPENING FOR THE PARELVISSCHERIJ ORDONNANTIE FROM STAATSBLAD OF 1893.
SOURCE: SIDELPHER.NL

The article then continues that He, the Governor General, found it to be desirable for the penal provision to be quickly established, as he had taken into consideration all of the regulations present in the corpus of legal law in the Netherlands Indies, and had *goedgevonden en verstaan*, or approved and understood the ordinance to be enacted as such (Staatsblad van Nederlandsch Indie, 1893). The first article stated that any personnel who are not of the indigenous population, under the authority and power of the colonial state, must not fish for pearl oysters without first obtaining a permit from, or on behalf of, the Governor General himself (Staatsblad van Nederlandsch Indie,

1893). This invocation of the figurehead – the sovereign – of the colonial state recurs throughout the ordinance. The anxieties surrounding the Governor-General's imperfect presence stem from the complex situation that occurred in the Aru Islands nearly a year before, although, arguably, it had been the case almost 40 years earlier, when the sea became a specter of instability stemming from the uncontrolled, unmonitored nature of waterways.

As the fourth article of the *Parelvisscherij Ordonnantie* stated, anyone caught pearl fishing without the explicit permission from the Governor General would be liable to be detained by the commander of a Royal Dutch ship, along with the officers of the Royal Marines. This outlying detail of punishment arose to enforce and, eventually, exclude Aru from any circumstances that could allow the archipelago to operate independently of Dutch control. This 1893 piece of legislation, therefore, controlled what the sea had become and, by extension, the Aru Islands themselves. This was further reinforced when, years before the landing of colonial forces in 1893, the colonial state commissioned barometric mapping of anchorage sites in Aru. As cited by the *Tijdschrift van het Aardrijkskundig Genootschap* 1890 (1890), the Hydrological Bureau of the Netherlands Indies, based in Batavia, has mapped these places, including places located in the backshore such as Mariri and Lolla (1888), Watuley group (1888), along with Krei (1888), Wammar, where Dobo is located (1880), Maikor (1888), and the southern parts of the Aru Islands (1885). Within just eight years, we see the Batavian interest in mapping anchorage places in and around the main *negeri* or pearling banks reflects the state's growing anxieties about Batavia's failure to fully incorporate the archipelago.

Thus, when the *Parelvisscherij Ordonnantie* was published in 1893, it tells a different story of how the territoriality of Aru was imagined, and most importantly, projected by Western cartographical machines in the interest of the colonial state. It is as much an internal stabilization

effort by the Dutch as it is a show of force and reaffirmation of Dutch colonial rule against international forces. While understanding only the precariousness and unpreparedness of Dutch colonial forces against the encroachment of the British mechanized pearl-shelling industry, it is a mistake to divorce these tensions from the constant local tensions that have been in the making for decades, and arguably even centuries. The consolidation of power and the terminology pertinent to pearl fishing in the Aru Islands thus employ the term “Territorial Waters” without specificity, enabling the state to respond as it sees fit.

This part of the chapter will examine the supposed “closure” of the Aru Islands from non-Dutch influence by reading closely into 1893, as well as its incarnations in 1902 and 1905, to show the rough and uneven surface of mapping Aru as a legible part of the empire. Here, before continuing the story of the *Parelvisscherij ordonnantie*, I would like to take a detour to explain what has concurrently happened on the other side of the sea in Australia. There, James Clark, who had pioneered his own way in the growing Australian pearl shelling industry since 1881 in Cape York, Queensland, and later in 1886 in Broome, Western Australia, before moving back to Thursday Island in Queensland (Martinez & Vickers, 2015), began to look for multiple ways of leaving the British settlement. As Federalism began to spread throughout the late nineteenth century in Australia, it pushed for the exclusion of Asian laborers from Australia’s industry, including the pearl-fishing industry. The White Australia Policy, or the Immigration Restriction Act, was eventually passed by the federal government in 1901, serving as the final nail in the coffin. Clark, along with this consortium composed of several white Australian pearl masters, Munro Ridge & Co., and George Smith & Co., established the Clark Combination consortium in Thursday Island (Mullins, 2002).

In looking for a way to escape the White Australia Policy – or face the consequences of replacing all of his workers with white labors, the newly formed Clarck Combination began eyeing the Aru Islands to its north. As discussed in the previous chapter, Australian pearl shellers have been making trips to the islands, in their own interest in expanding and exploring the supposed ‘untapped natural resources’ existing there. Pearl oysters had come to be known as one of such natural wealth and had been a subject of almost direct confrontation between the Dutch, who in their own imagination were believed to have worked in the interest of the Aruese, and the incoming Australian schooners and sloops. Colonial newspapers from both sides portrayed each other in an antagonistic manner, reflecting the larger Anglo-Dutch imperial rivalry. Such as in 1894, when the Dutch military sent the warship *Pontianak* to counter the Australian ships fishing for pearls off the waters of Aru’s backshore (“Particulier”, *Sourabaijasche Handelsblad*, 1893). Meanwhile, as prices have risen up to f100/pikol for the pearl shells, the Australian pearl shellers accused the Dutch government of being jealous of the British “industrious nature” (“Cruise of H.M.S. Lizard Pearl Shelling at Aru Islands”, *The Daily Telegraph*, 1894).

While eventually the consortium successfully bid their way to the Netherlands Indies by buying the water around all of the Amboina Residency in 1905 for a price of f85,300 and registering their company in Batavia under the name “Celebes Trading Company” (Mullins, 2002). Together, these developments are commonly marked as Aru’s *fin de siècle* integration into broader patterns of colonial expansion and control across the Netherlands Indies. However, here I am not interested in reiterating the story of negotiations across the two rival colonial states; rather, I would like to focus on how the colonial sources try to imagine and map the Aruese existence onto one that fits the logic of the early nineteenth-century visits or surveys. Here, I will interrogate the epistemic mapping of the archipelago through the use of the pearl-fishing ordinance and its supplementary

regulations. By putting these views into conversations, the Dutch lawmakers' crafted views will be open to being cracked and deprived of their colonial logic.

Circling back to the 1893 Pearl fishing Ordinance lays the groundwork of what constitutes the colonial idea of territoriality. Here, the category of the violators will determine the degree of punishment; Europeans would receive either *f* 10 – *f* 1000 or 6 – 2 years' imprisonment, while those deemed native or others would receive 6 days or 2 years of forced labor (Staatsblad van Nederlandsch Indie, 1893). Then, the article continued that any items found to be in violation of this ordinance shall be automatically forfeited and taken over by the state – echoing the colonial state's power to access and claim the oysters and other sea products (Staatsblad van Nederlandsch Indie, 1893). Yet this limited provision serves only as a stopgap measure to address maps that show the arbitrary nature of the colonial state's "territoriality". Putting such a concept into the fluid littoral zones is hard to imagine and only exists to the extent of the physical presence of the military in these waters. Article 4 of the ordinance explicitly states that the Governor-General assigned the commander of the colonial naval warships, along with officers from the ships of the colonial marine and the officers' advisors' boats, to patrol the waters in implementing the ordinance (Staatsblad van Nederlandsch Indie, 1893).

In the evolution of this ordinance, introduced again in the Pearl Fishing Ordinance No. 4, 1902, the colonial state used an exact measurement in designing the territoriality of the colonial littoral zone, by introducing that the fishing of the pearl shells of no more than 3 nautical miles from the *laagwaterlijn* or low tide of the coast in the islands of the Netherlands Indies (Staatsblad voor Nederlandsch Indie, 1902). The 3 nautical miles follows the old rules born from disputes in the North Sea between Scandinavian kingdoms (Kent, 1954). It was accepted and, within this colonial jurisdiction, came to be formulated as an extension of the law from the colonial metropole. Another

interesting item presented in this legislation is article no.3, which explicitly states that the right of indigenous people to fish the articles of the sea products is fully reserved, insofar as they have been traditionally exercised” (Staatsblad voor Nederlandsch Indie, 1902).

The last passage glimpses an interesting way the state defines the native inhabitants. It then continues that these traditional fishing grounds are defined by law as any area that does not exceed 5 fathoms (9 meters) in depth (Staatsblad voor Nederlandsch Indie, 1902). When put into the context of the Aru Islands, these 5-fathom limits did not appear in the historical records of both the Aruese diving capacity and the archipelago's geography. P.N. van Kampen (1908), who went to the Aru Islands in 1907 to investigate the pearl fishing there, confronts an interesting predicament on the five fathom. Firstly, as previous observations have shown, the Aruese have been reported to have dived to depths of 8 –9 fathoms (de Clercq, 1975), without using any particular complex diving equipment. This then creates a narrow depth that is available for Aruese pearl divers to explore other pearling banks that might have been exhausted from years of fishing, making their movement constricted to only within the boundary of 3 nautical miles and five fathoms. Secondly, the five fathom lines also did not consider the meandering and crisscrossing nature of the Backshore archipelago, which Kampen (1908) has noted, which has plenty of tiny coves and bays that surprisingly contained secluded banks that are more than 5 fathoms deep, inside the territorial water line. This then becomes problematic, as can be seen within this image of the Jedan archipelago in the northeastern parts of the Aru Islands.

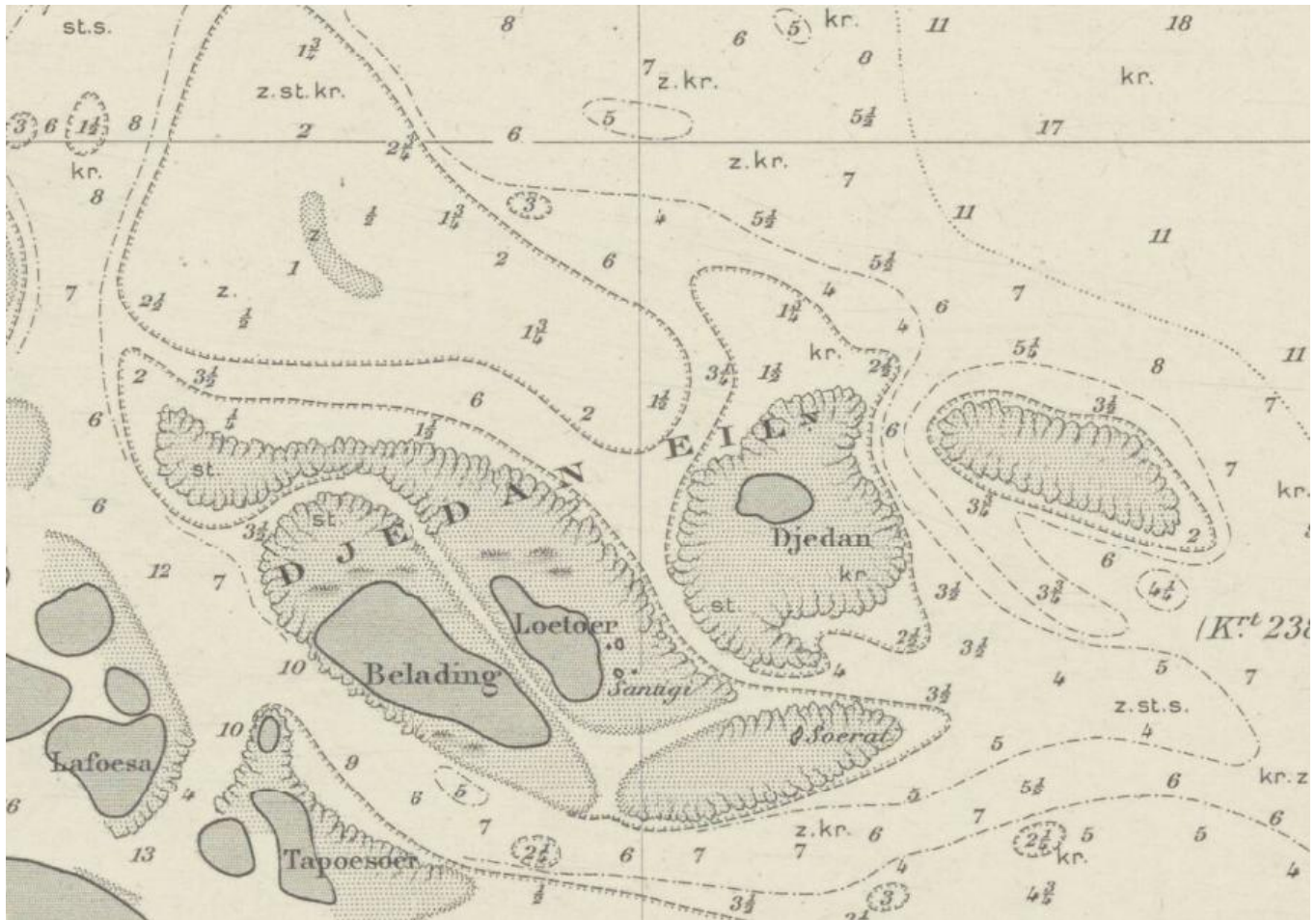


IMAGE 11. THE JEDAN ARCHIPELAGO IN NORTHEASTERN PART OF THE ARU ISLANDS, PRODUCED BY THE HYDROGRAPHICAL DIVISION OF THE MINISTRY OF MARINE, 1911. SOURCE: KITLV

Jedan, which lies in the northern part of the Backshore islands, is crisscrossed by several places with depths of more than 5 fathoms, located close to the islands in the archipelago. This decision to reserve the 5 fathoms for the Aruese only serves to reinforce the meaning behind the “traditionally exercised fishing”. That is a perceived technical limitation on the Aruese's side. As Kampen (1908) also later notes, the availability of Western diving equipment enables Australian employees to dive up to 15 – 16 fathoms deep (more or less 26-27 meters) and they could stay underwater for minutes on end with the breathing tube. Bucher (2004) notes that the introduction of diving gear greatly extended the time a diver could spend underwater, enabling the pearling

season to be extended from three to nine months in the Aru Islands. This significant shift introduced a pearling pattern that did not follow the traditional monsoon pattern of the West and East monsoons, which brought rainy and dry seasons to the area. It is worth noting that Australian companies were recruiting laborers from diverse backgrounds for this part of the industry, mostly Japanese, Filipino, and various laborers from the Indonesian archipelago. The owners – also colloquially known as Pearl Masters – paid their employees in commission, which in the case of the Celebes Trading Company, was around *f*0.25 per shell (van Kampen, 1908). With this, “dress diving” – to distinguish it from naked diving – was operated with industrial-scale precision. The fleets, which would be divided into “floating stations” – each consisting of a pearling schooner would receive the catch from a boat called a lugger. The luggers would work, day and night, to quickly take as many shells as possible (Butcher, 2004), and in the year when Kampen was visiting, they had a record of fishing about 7 tons of pearl oysters per lugger (van Kampen, 1908).

Thus, with the passage of the 1902 ordinance, the colonial state not only limited the physical extent of the Aruese fishing ground but also kept it virtually as a passive, immovable unit, existing within the state’s preconception of “traditional”. This pattern of territoriality, both metaphorically and physically, continues a perpetuating fiction of the Aruese as “victims” of the outside world’s encroachment on the archipelago. This was even more explicit in the subsequent 1905 legislation, which stipulated that it is legally required for the tenant of the pearling banks to pay an amount that is presentably sufficient for the local communities, with the government's approval (*Staatsblad voor Nederlandsch Indie*, 1905). Kampen (1908) later wrote that the compensation for the duration of the CTC lease from 1905 was about *f*25,000, without specifying how it was being paid or to whom.

While unpacking this thread of Aru as the perpetual victims, I would like to use the term introduced by a collective report made by a Malukan NGO activist from 1993 to describe the declining state of the Maluku people as “*Orang-Orang Kalah*” or the “Defeated People”, amidst the excessive natural exploitation happening in the region. Here, about 89 years after the concession of the Celebes Trading Company and a century after the 1892-93 rebellion, Aru was portrayed as a forgotten or lost “metropolis” tucked away at the corner of the world. The article, which had been compiled from all over Maluku, describes the “Defeated People” as having a bitter relationship with the sovereign – the state of Indonesia – and its blatant disregard of Aruese living conditions. Aruese, who had carried their traditional way of diving for pearls, were being outcompeted by foreign companies that came with their advanced gears (I. *perangkat teknologi modern*), and the companies – operating the rules that had been established in 1902 –partitioned (I. *mengkapling-kapling*) the sea to be exclusively exploited (Najib et al, 1993).

The growing dissatisfaction with the Indonesian government were felt throughout many parts of the archipelago and while the Aruese, such as the villagers of Wokam, have complained about the hundreds of motorized vessels operating mere hundred meters from their homes, the owners of such companies would only show a piece of paper – stamped and approved by the local government office – in legitimizing their practice (Najib et al, 1993). *Kesewenang-wenangan* is a term used to describe this practice: the arbitrary, despotic display of power shown by the company towards the Aruese. This portrayal of defeat and a hopeless situation can be seen reverberating back from the beginning of the nineteenth century. While the present socio-economic circumstances of the Aruese are complex, the temporality of such colonial acts has become sedimented in the islands’ portrayal within the state’s logics. From Bik’s encounter with the Makassarese traders in Apra and Longgar, he had presented the Aruese as hopeless victims of a

system that is far larger than their “simple lives”. This persistence of fiction becomes a driving force of colonial logic in mapping Aru as a legible part of the empire, which was well inherited by the Indonesian state.

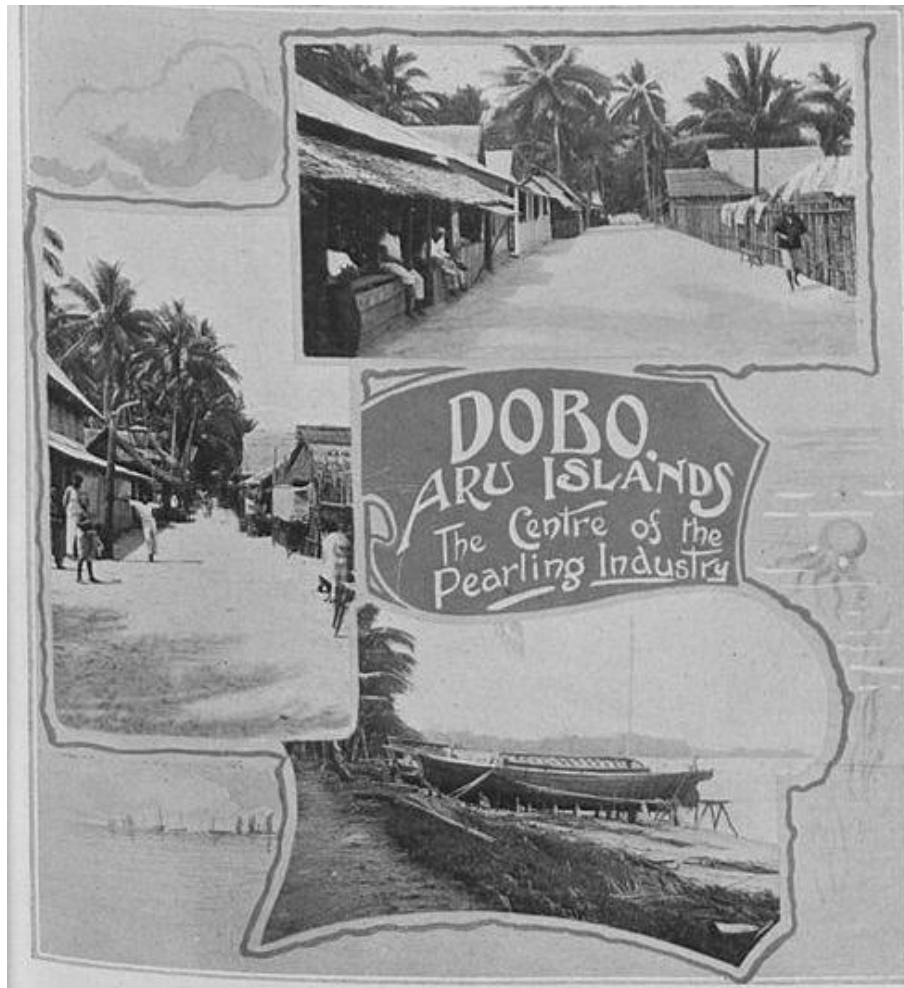


IMAGE 12. DOBO, THE ARU ISLANDS. SOURCE: ISLES OF THE EAST, 1912.

Conclusion

Reading back against the “defeated people” reveals that the political power of the state – particularly the Netherlands Indies – shows the complex complicity of Aruese in their performative project. Throughout its entrance into the colonial state’s record, Aru has been a site of slippery topography, where its political influence came and went as the waves themselves. The appointment

of the Orang Kaya, the deliberation of conflicts between *negeri*, and eventually violent response between traders and Aruese all show that Aru is not a one-dimensional character. But with its own waves of valleys and hills, where a strategic relationship with the sovereign state, the Netherlands Indies. This complicit entanglement also shows that trade and pearling in the Aru Islands have many facets.

Conflicts between Makassarese Buginese and Chinese creditors, and between the Backshore Aruese and these creditors, provide another layer of contextualization for the movements of the 1880s – 1890s. This shows that both trade and the Dutch state’s attempts to monitor it influenced one another and culminated in Aruese's response to these seemingly mutually imbricating forces. Such a response shows that Aru was not a “defeated people” as assigned through the ordinances of 1902 and 1905. This fiction only comes true when reading Aruese's past as passive units of history, animated only by external factors. A creation at the moment of silence that lived through the song *Zaman Belanda* was employed to integrate Aru as a legible part of the colonial state. The silencing of the history involved by illustrating Aru as a site of “defeated people” that was open for violent response by invoking the presence of the Governor General. This ultimately positioned the state as a producer of the violence that it believed was protecting the Aruese. Thus, this logical fallacy creates a reality in which state violence was permissible under the guise of “protection” or “guidance” for the Aruese.

Conclusion

As the questions in the introduction lay out, this thesis examines how pearl oysters and pearling—as a historical practice—exposed the various complicit entanglements of both Aruese and non-Aruese actors in the Aru Islands. This particular entanglement is crucial to view critically during the eventful nineteenth century. By retracing the works produced by colonial officers and administrators, I identified a missing element in the narrative of Aru's history: the logic of the state in engaging with oysters and, consequently, the Aru Islands as an epistemological unit. Thus, as this thesis has discussed, the construction of Aru as a conceptual space within the written record is a source I wish to provoke and expose by reading against and along the grain of its narratives. What does it mean, then, to dive into the colonial epistemology of Aru?

The answer lies in how the historical entanglement of pearl oysters produced Aru as a site of epistemic production. As the first chapter has tried to illustrate, the oysters, as things rather than objects with specific and stable lives, live to project something of a wild entanglement as commodities. Its existence was always a question of “which part of the thing that is being discussed?” I believe the material history of pearl oysters is one of constant interruption and mutilation, asking whether the stories tell how the animal lives, its death and transformation into shells and commodities, or the so-called “final destination” where it enters various markets, reshaping its biological form yet again into something entirely new? This biologically mutilated corpse then tells a story that pearl oysters uniquely narrate as a commodity, one of constant (de)centering—a narrative unique to the pearl oyster as a commodity.

When looking into how this story was recorded within colonial state records—its moment of historical creation—it began not with its life in the sea, but during its harvest: when its bulky, carbonated inner shell was torn and processed within the bows of Aruese and Sulawesi *perahu* or Australian luggers. It enters the annals as a thing rife with instability, almost always becoming a site of importance through exchanges with other objects. Oysters, alongside other marine life such as *trepang*, were not treated as standalone sea products, but as items whose significance shifted through exchange. Whether traded for *arak*, textiles, bronze gongs, or elephant tusks, these significant items for Aruese Backshore communities defined the elasticity of pearls as "things-in-motion." They were harvested and traded for items in demand among both Aruese and non-Aruese traders, at the intersection of their respective politics of value.

Thus, in following the way oysters proliferated as trade grew in the nineteenth century, this (de)centering necessitates looking beyond the oysters themselves. Rather, it requires an investigation into recurring moments of intersectionality in which the oysters dissipate, and their value is revealed only through encountering other things. This unique shifting of scope and scale at the moment of circulation paints a picture of Aruese history as one rife with moving epistemic encounters. As shown through the "logics of productivity" in the first chapter, Dutch records often created a logic wherein pearl oysters in Aru only manifested "unharmonious" or "unproductive" encounters with expanding trade. Dutch administrators attributed this profusely to the presence of Makassarese, Buginese, or Chinese merchants and their practice of lending money to the Aruese.

Although such credit practices did tend to amplify tensions, the Dutch perceived the pearls as "turbulent things"—a freak wave ready to erode colonial political legitimacy in Aru. Within such moments of intersectionality, the Dutch measured the "productivity" of Aruese oysters as a central

mechanism for cementing the state's political rule. Therefore, iterations of "productivity" were organized around Aru as a stable unit of the colony. Following this logic, the colonial state began envisioning Aru as a "lighthouse" in the distant frontier of colonial waters, upholding the Netherlands Indies as an inevitable historical entity through the guidance of the European *mission civilisatrice*. The colonial state molded itself into an entity "bigger than life" for both the pearls and the Aruese. This epistemic pulse required the state not as the main character of the performance, but as the backdrop and apparatus that made the play possible.

It is therefore important to interrogate this logic by looking at how the complex intersectionality of pearl oysters moved alongside state expansion. To showcase how the oysters moved within these (de)centralizing shifts is to recognize that Dutch administrative accounts stem from a moment of "fiction-making," where control over the oysters was in constant slippage. The oysters served both as a source tapped by the state to invoke influence and a site where such construction was constantly being unmade. This requires the thesis to shift gears: by retrieving the logic of the colonial state's idea of "productivity," a fictional terrain of Aru is conjured—a terrain in which the Aruese are trapped in perpetual cycles of "unproductivity." This was exemplified by the term *orang-orang kalah*, or the "defeated people," used to describe Aruese life amid the commodification of oysters. While this term is borrowed from a 1993 report on the "forgotten" lives of the Aruese under the Suharto government, I believe it aptly expresses a recursive moment of colonial fiction. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Dutch colonial state portrayed the Aruese as constant victims—powerless and defeated by commercial forces. It situated the Aruese as naïve characters played by influential foreign traders. The Dutch colonial state then positioned itself as a foreign entity that nevertheless embodied the role of an Aruese spiritual

leader, guiding them away from perceived misery and vice, with alcoholism being a recurrent theme in administrative highlights.

For the colonial state, epistemic ordering meant recasting any intersectionality involving pearl oysters as "illegal" unless granted state permission. This process of reordering necessitated undermining the slippery nature of the oysters through pathways often opened by violent means. The colonial violent responses to Backshore tensions of the 1850s, 1880s, and 1890s were entangled in a web of forces commodifying pearls, particularly the trade between Backshore Aruese and foreign traders. While credit lending and trade created tension, the intensity of violence in the late nineteenth century was a direct result of the colonial process, as it cemented its presence in the islands. The centrality of oysters in this reordering came into full swing as Australian pearl shellers entered the complex pearling world, involving not only "unruly" subjects but the presence of another expanding colonial power. This pushed the Dutch to lay direct claim to the oysters in the depths of the colony's "territorial waters." While these notions precipitated the violence of 1892–1893, Australian expansion alone cannot explain the rebellion's exceptionally violent nature and the subsequent reprisals. Recurring moments of violence dating back to the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries show that the Dutch perception of oysters evolved alongside these temporalities.

Yet this movement seems to have shifted the oysters' meaning, from a prized possession attempted to be monopolized by the company to things-in-motion with their own lives that risk undermining the colonial state's political influence in Aru. While the Australian entrance in the 1870s-1890s amplified this paranoia with significant volume, the origin of concern about the oysters always lay in Aruese's relationship with the colonial state. The gift-giving of the Dutch

tricolor flag, silver-tipped cane, and other significant items displayed in chapter two shows that the reciprocity of political relationships in Aru had already accommodated certain differing political values. While Aruese *negeri* saw these entanglements as elastic and certainly strategic for their interests, the Dutch administrators expected direct loyalty to the state's political presence. This loyalty seemingly came to be understood as direct European patronage for engagement in Aru.

While Batavia saw this elastic relationship as a potential undermining to be managed by the distant Governor-General, a reading of the colonial accounts shows the state then pushing to involve itself in the everyday actions of Aruese life. The process of reordering then requires the birth of colonial patronage, resulting in a reality rife with "discipline" that reframes Aru as a place in need of constant monitoring. This would then order the pearl oysters as a "productive" unit of the empire, requiring a violent restructuring of Aru that leads to casting Aruese as victims and the "defeated people". This reckons the state, then, to reorder the oysters as existing as a legal subject under colonial jurisdiction, treating them as colonial subjects. With ordinances from 1893, 1902, and 1905, these legal instances create an image of oysters as a legal subject of the state. Consequently, the commodification that has intersected with the bivalve's existence had to be placed under surveillance, and its motions tracked through the waterways of Aru. Living with this imagined exactitude thus makes the oysters a crucial part of the Aru islands, which could eventually be recast as an ordered and legible unit of the Netherlands East Indies.

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