



Mark Meuwese, ***Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade: Dutch-Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595-1674*** (Atlantic World. Europe, Africa and the Americas, 1500-1674 Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2012, xii + 367 pp., ISBN 978 90 04 21083 7).

At first glance, Mark Meuwese's book is a welcome addition to the historiography of Dutch expansion in the Atlantic in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Monographs on Atlantic history that adopt a comparative framework are still quite rare. *Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade* is the result of an ambitious research project: a comparison between no less than four 'contact zones', as he labels them, of Dutch colonial expansion (7). In his 2003 dissertation, defended at the University of Notre Dame, Meuwese covered New Netherland and Brazil, both on the American side of the Atlantic. In this book he adds the Gold Coast and Kongo and Angola, on the African side. In order to keep the project manageable (and the monograph readable, we may presume) he restricts his timeframe considerably, focusing on Dutch expansion under the first West India Company, i.e. up to 1674. Thematically, the author confines himself 'to examining intercultural diplomacy and formal alliances' (13). These two aspects of Dutch-indigenous relations include the negotiations between Dutch and indigenous representatives, written treaties, letters from Dutch stadholders, and the embassies from, for instance, Brazil and Kongo, to the Dutch Republic. Exploration, trade (despite being mentioned in the title of the book), religion, inter-European rivalry, and Dutch internal politicking – all factors that influenced developments overseas – are referred to only occasionally.

In his analysis, Meuwese mainly adheres to a geographical structure. He first provides the reader with an overview of the rise and fall of the WIC from 1621 to 1674. By virtue of its charter, the WIC was empowered to conclude treaties with 'foreign princes', which made it the sole Dutch governmental institution to enter into formal alliances with indigenous peoples in the Atlantic. In the second chapter, Meuwese moves back in time to the years between 1590 and 1623, when Dutch ships first explored the Atlantic and established contact with indigenous peoples. After these two introductory chapters, Meuwese allocates chapters to each of the zones in which the West India Company was active after 1623: Brazil, Angola/Kongo, New Netherland, and the Gold Coast. By 1674, the Dutch territorial presence in the Atlantic had been reduced considerably, as Angola/Kongo and Brazil were back under

Portuguese control and the English were in charge of New Netherland. Meuwese is right to point out that alliances between the Dutch and indigenous peoples were more frequent and were of greater importance than has previously been assumed, by Benjamin Schmidt for instance (319). To a large extent, Meuwese achieves his stated aim 'to integrate Native peoples from the Americas and West Africa more fully in the Dutch Atlantic by comparing intercultural relations in four frontiers of the WIC's empire' (6). Yet beyond emphasizing the agency of indigenous peoples, the comparison between the four contact zones yields little of substance. In fact, the conclusion hardly contains a reference to the geographical framework employed by the author.

Unfortunately, Meuwese's style is rather pedestrian and the author is prone to jump to conclusions, especially when these favor his thesis. At times, his chronological narrative is too descriptive, largely as a result of his reliance on secondary literature. Only a limited amount of archival research can be done for a study of this scope. However, more use of original source material would have added nuance and color to the narrative.

A major problem in *Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade* is the main thesis: 'without the cooperation and support of the indigenous peoples [...] the Dutch would not have been able to establish an influential Atlantic empire' (4). That is quite a claim: it goes beyond integrating indigenous peoples in the Dutch Atlantic, and makes them essential to the whole enterprise. The advantage of a bold thesis is, of course, that it sparks vigorous discussion. So in response, let me pick up the gauntlet and state that I remain unconvinced. Meuwese's comparative geographical framework obscures crucial aspects of one of his main sources: the written contracts and treaties concluded by West India Company representatives and indigenous peoples. The importance of these documents exceeded the geographical limits of the contact zone where they were drawn up. They played an important role in boosting the Dutch claims vis-à-vis other European colonizers. For instance, they were used as evidence in litigation and as arguments in diplomatic exchanges in Europe. To the annoyance of for instance the English, Dutch officials consistently argued that indigenous peoples were fully empowered to conclude exclusive trading agreements with the Dutch. Once signed, the West India Company used these treaties to bolster its attempts to stop the English, Swedes, and French from trading on the Gold Coast, for instance. In many cases, the format of treaties with indigenous peoples, both in the Atlantic and in Asia, was specifically geared toward intra-European use. In a similar vein, receiving ambassadors from overseas parts served to strengthen the case for Dutch independence, at least in the eyes of the States General.

Meuwese ignores this European context of Dutch-indigenous treaties and diplomacy, and thus presents an incomplete picture. The initial impetus of Dutch expansion and the eventual fate of the Dutch Atlantic empire were governed by rivalries within Europe, in particular with Spain, Portugal and England. These rivalries

spilt over into other parts of the world and far outweighed the importance of indigenous cooperation in determining Dutch successes and failures in the Atlantic. The diplomatic contacts with indigenous peoples and the treaties and agreements the Dutch made overseas were primarily shaped by developments in Europe. Overseas expansion was a sideshow when compared to the struggle against Spain in the first half of the seventeenth century and the rivalry with England in the second half. It is myopic, not to say misleading, to interpret treaties with indigenous peoples solely within a bilateral framework. A thematic rather than a geographical treatment, and a global perspective, including Europe and Asia, would have served Meuwese much better than an Atlantic perspective. Still, this book has much going for it. As a survey and a starting point for further discussion and research this authoritative book will prove indispensable to many researchers, especially those without access to works written in Dutch.

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