

*Nieuwe Tijd*

Adam Clulow, *Amboina, 1623. Fear and Conspiracy on the Edge of Empire* (Columbia University Press; New York, 2019) 312p., £54 ISBN 9780231175128;

Allison Games, *Inventing the English Massacre: Amboyna in History and Memory* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 2020) 312p., ill., £22,99 ISBN 9780197507735

**Fear, justice and memory-making in early-modern empires**

This is a delicious pair of books by two skilled historians. Both deal with the so-called 'Amboyna massacre'. In late February and early March 1623, a group of Japanese mercenaries and English East India Company (EIC) merchants were questioned and tortured in Fort Victoria, a Dutch East India Company (VOC) stronghold on the island of Amboyna (current-day eastern Indonesia). The Dutch authorities suspected them of a conspiracy to capture the fortification. The accused men, tortured by means of waterboarding and burning candles, ultimately confessed. A commission of VOC judges sentenced ten EIC officials, another ten Japanese mercenaries, and an Indo-Portuguese slave overseer to death.

When news of the trial reached English and Dutch shores, it very quickly turned into a heated controversy between the two allied European trading empires. A pamphlet war about the legality of the proceedings broke out, the EIC demanded satisfaction and justice. After three decades of bickering and competing claims, the Dutch conceded to pay reparations as stipulated by the articles of the 1654 Peace of Westminster that brought the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652-54) to an end. But this settlement did not close the chapter. The 'Amboyna massacre', as it had come to be known in English public discourse, would be recycled time and again until as late as the early twentieth century.

Although there is some overlap between the books, they illuminate different aspects

of this intriguing early modern episode. In *Amboina, 1623*, Adam Clulow, an associate professor at University of Texas, meticulously reconstructs the early-modern global contexts in which the trial took place. In *Inventing the English Massacre*, Allison Games, a professor of history at Georgetown University, shows how the trial was wrested from this original context, molded into an Anglo-Dutch dispute, and subsequently transformed into a key episode in English public and imperial memory. By zooming in on this dramatic event and its long afterlife, Clulow and Games unlock a fascinating world of early modern conspiracy, imperial fear and paranoia, shrewd media campaigns, and strategies of imperial self-fashioning.

Unlike the preoccupations of an older historiography concerned with the Amboyna trial, Clulow is not probing the guilt or innocence of the executed men (although he makes it no secret that he deems the alleged English conspiracy to conquer the fort unlikely). Instead, the puzzle he seeks to solve is how the situation escalated so quickly: from the initial interrogation of a Japanese mercenary who had asked suspicious questions about the fortress' defenses to the torture and execution of multiple alleged conspirators in a ramshackle legal process.

The series of lucid chapters that follow reconstruct a world in which the Dutch authorities at Fort Victoria and the adjacent town of Kota Ambon were surrounded by 'allies' they did not trust. These feelings of

distrust and insecurity only intensified as the Dutch establishment itself was inhabited by 'serpent-like' Englishmen, unruly 'bold' Japanese mercenaries, and enslaved prisoners overseen by an 'unreliable' overseer.

Clulow convincingly shows that Herman van Speult, the governor of Amboyna and second highest Dutch military commander after Jan Pieterszoon Coen, did not act from a position of strength but from a position of insecurity and fear. Coen's genocidal war in the Banda Islands only two years before the Amboyna trial was intended to establish Dutch domination, but in the wider region it had created violent disorder.

The VOC could only enter into and become successful in the spice trade by concluding treaties with local southeast-Asian authorities, enforcing the exchange of protection for tribute often in the form of Dutch control of key spices. Yet these local rulers, many of whom fell under the mighty Muslim sultanate of Ternate, repeatedly by-passed or ignored the treaties. In the years building up to the 1623 trial, several occasions of violent clashes, moments of armed resistance, and a stream of rumors and reports trickled into the minds of the Dutch Amboyna authorities.

One reason Clulow's book pays off is that he elegantly weaves into his story recent studies on and fresh insights into early modern (Dutch) empire-building, a field to which he himself has contributed considerably (yet Clulow generously declares his indebtedness to his colleagues). The practices and limitations of treaty-making is one topic within that field, the VOC's reliance on slavery and slave trade another. His informed discussion of the recruitment of Asian mercenaries furthermore underlines the hybridity of a Dutch empire that, as the Leiden historian Catia Antunes and others have maintained, was not so 'Dutch' after all.

The trial itself, Clulow argues, was 'a legal mess crammed with errors, strange gaps in the record, and omitted procedures' (p.151). To a significant extent the acting advocate-fiscal, a legal bungler, was responsible for this state of affairs. Back in Europe both the English and the Dutch portrayed the trial as 'methodical' and 'carefully planned'. That might be surprising, but Clulow offers an explanation. The English, on the one hand, had every reason to depict it as deliberate: to make the case that Dutch had treacherously and consciously betrayed them. The Dutch, on the other hand, also had reason to render the trial as systematic and careful, but for diametrically opposed reasons: the trial, including the torture, was legal and justified. As a consequence, the trial has been misunderstood for centuries.

Although Clulow devotes two short chapters to the trial's aftermath, Allison Games really picks up the story of what happened when news of the trial in the far East reached English shores in May-June 1624. It arrived at a highly inconvenient moment: King James I was about to sign a defense treaty with the Dutch United Provinces to bolster their common fight against Spain. London-based EIC officers, enraged by the testimonies of six survivors from the original trial, had to tread carefully; there was hardly a worse moment imaginable for public outrage against supposed Dutch atrocities combined with cries for compensation or even revenge.

Nonetheless, anti-Dutch sentiments were brewing in 1624-25 (to the point that 800 guards had to be posted in the streets of London to prevent violent riots against the Dutch inhabitants of London). In chapter 3 'Inventing the Amboyna Massacre', the best chapter of the book, Games provides a rich contextualization and interpretation of the famous woodcuts, songs, and (EIC-ordered) pamphlets that were produced. This partly

orchestrated, partly spontaneous multimedia campaign portrayed the English merchants as martyrs, suffering innocent Protestants, butchered by treacherous 'allies'. The Amboyna setting, the Japanese mercenaries, the alleged conspiracy: all gone. This was a moment of early-modern de-globalization.

The first edition of the carefully produced pamphlet ordered by the EIC *A True Relation of the unjust, cruell, and barbarous proceedings against the English* was published in 1624; on multiple occasions new editions followed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the thirteenth in 1781 (during the fourth Anglo-Dutch War).

Games thus recounts three fascinating histories of the event: how it was detached from the global, conspiracy-ridden context (as described by Clulow); how it was refabricated into – and branded as – a 'massacre' through print media; and how it evolved into a story of English innocence and Dutch treachery that lived on for centuries. The

trial and execution of the English merchants, Games shows in the final two chapters, turned into 'a shared cultural and emotional touchstone' (p.12).

One aspect I was missing and am eager to learn more about – and I readily admit this relates to my own current research interests – is the reparations scheme concluded in 1654 and the arbitration process that preceded it. Both Clulow and Games mention the settlement but do not systematically analyze it. Yet this formal settlement is noteworthy as it represents an early-modern form of reparations – paid by the Dutch to individual descendants – for an 'historical injustice'. But instead of a criticism, this might just as well be another confirmation that the Amboyna trial, as Clulow and Games have admirably shown, offers a spectacular window onto fear, justice, and memory-making in early modern empires.

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