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Knowledge and Power: Rumphius' *Ambonese Herbal* and *Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet* as Colonial Contact Zones

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The early modern books on Ambonese natural history by G.E. Rumphius have mostly been analysed for their aesthetic form and scientific content. However, with the concept of contact zones as introduced by M.L. Pratt, these texts can also be read as historical sources about colonialism and slavery in the late seventeenth-century Moluccas. This article explores the traces of colonialism and slavery in Rumphius' *Ambonese Herbal* (1740ff.) and the *Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet* (1705).

In the second half of the seventeenth century, Georg Eberhard Rumpf from Hanau, Germany found himself a permanent migrant on the Moluccan island of Ambon. First soldier, then merchant, then natural scholar in the service of the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, VOC), he settled down and had a family with a local woman and chose not to return to Europe. After he had written a history of Ambon that focused on the Moluccas during colonisation, the VOC granted him time, books and services to research wildlife in the region. Authored under the Latinised name Rumphius, his *Amboinsche Rariteitkamer* (Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet) was published in Holland in 1705 and the *Amboinsche Kruid-boek* (Ambonese Herbal) from 1741 onwards. Written in the colonial contact zone of the East Indies and highly influential in contemporary European conchology and botany, both books also belong to the late twentieth-century literary canon of the former Dutch East Indies.

Contact zones have been defined by Mary Louise Pratt as 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery'.[1] While Pratt's specific

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analysis of European travel writing on South America and Africa has been challenged,[2] amended and supplemented,[3,4] her concept continues to be applied within the fields of history and ethnology to colonial situations in different times and spaces.[5,6]

The first case study focuses on slave work as one prerequisite of knowledge production in colonial territories, and the connections between the human body and scientific objects. It analyses how Rumpf referred to enslaved workers, and how they contributed material to his research for the *Ambonese Herbal*. The second case study focuses on locals as mediators of knowledge in the *Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet*, specifically on exchanges that included asymmetrical trade-offs. It examines how Rumpf gathered information from local people, and how these exchanges were portrayed in his text.

The history of enslavement and the slave trade in modern-day Indonesia and the area around the Indian Ocean has recently attracted attention,[7,8] while research on the Atlantic slave trade has long been established.[9] Markus Vink published his seminal article on 'Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century' in 2003,[10] in which he pointed out that, in contrast to the Americas, 'European colonial powers took over and interacted with existing Indian Ocean systems of slavery' (Ref. 10, p. 134). Against this backdrop, we re-read entries in Rumpf's Ambonese books, searching for connections between knowledge production in natural history and force exercised against people living and working under the colonial regime in the Moluccas.

While Pieter van Dam penned the details of the slave trade between Cape Town and Batavia for the managers of the VOC (*Heren XVII*) in Amsterdam in his *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*,[11] Rumpf described those forced to work for the VOC and its merchants for an academic public. Other than the *Beschryvinge*, which was guarded from circulation well into the nineteenth century, the *Ambonese Herbal* was edited and published in a Dutch-Latin version from the late 1730s onwards.[12] To a certain degree, his scholarly effort was made possible by the division of labour under the company regime. For one, in 1694, about 52% of the population of Kota Ambon were enslaved people, and, as in other 'urban centers and their surroundings', the town was among those 'true slave societies, in which slaves played an important part in both luxury and productive capacities, empowering particular groups of elites, deeply influenced by cultural developments […].' (Ref. 10, p. 148). Also, as E.M. Beekman has shown, Rumpf was himself head of a household that made use of slave labour, including 29 enslaved people in 1672.

In the *Ambonese Herbal*, enslaved workers were often encountered not as subjects of interaction, but as objects of observation. When writing more as an ethnographer in the 'uses' sections, Rumpf noted habits regarding food, health and physical or religious protection. The first, almost casual mention of slaves can be found early in the first book, in Chapter 1, entitled *Calappus Tree* (coconut), which Rumpf designated to be the 'captain of the ship'. There, he described ways to extract the oil from the fruit and notes that

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> […] housekeepers prefer the Ambonese way because this gives them a lot of Roroban, which is the lower water with the dregs, like a thick and sweet syrup, that the slaves like to eat with sugar and Sagu, or it is given to dogs and pigs to fatten them, but one will not get this with the Balinese method.[13]

While Rumpf did not shy away from arguing details and categorising information in the linguistic and reference sections of the entries targeted at readers in Europe, he did not expand on questions of nutrition for slaves. In the entry on the Blimbing Tree (Averrhoa carambola), for example, he adheres to a botanist's and businessman's perspective:

> […] and although these fruits are fine and large on Ceylon, they rarely reach perfection there, for the slaves and common people pick them when they are not ripe yet, and use them for their Curries, which are fish sauces, wherefore the fruit is not greatly esteemed there either […]. (Ref. 13, Book I, Chapter 13, p. 363)

In the *Ambonese Herbal*, writing about enslaved people helped to aggregate information about plant products and transitioned botanical knowledge into commercial knowledge for the company.

In the course of the books of the *Ambonese Herbal*, references to practices of slaves themselves were explicit, while those referring to the practices of enslavement were usually implicit. For example, when Rumpf wrote about uses of tamarind, he mentioned its benefits on ships covering long distances in general and used the term 'mariners' for the people travelling on these ships:

> Sugared Tamarind is really only for the Apothecaries, and was sent to Europe for that purpose in large pots and vats, being especially useful for Mariners, no matter if they lick it, or mix it in water, and make a cold dish from it, because it is a good laxative for people, cleans, and thins the thick blood caused by the coarse and salty ship's fare and will protect them from scurvy, which is such a scourge to Mariners. (Ref. 13, Book II, Chapter 32, p. 131)

The flip side to this neutralising perspective can be found in Pieter van Dam's chapter on slavery, which includes a list from 1685 specifying the provisions ships with 350 to 400 enslaved workers on board should carry: 'First 300 lb tamarind, for serving the sick and those plagued by scurvy' (Ref. 11, p. 669). Enslavement and the slave trade seem to be one step removed from Rumpf's Ambon, even though he probably witnessed them. He had travelled through Batavia and taken part in military expeditions in the Moluccan archipelago (so-called *hongi-tochten*) before he was promoted to the rank of merchant in 1657 (Ref. 12, p. 50).

In a similar way, Rumpf did not acknowledge slaves as informants or contributors to his scientific project – their second, more immediate role in knowledge production. He wrote about the slaves on the island of Banda as being 'well-trained' in separating mace from nutmeg, and doing 'this quite dexterously' (Ref. 13, Book II, Chapter 6, p. 29). However, he did not comment on the value of their craftsmanship and tacit business knowledge, which made his research possible, nor their ability to collect information and objects. An anecdote about a rare stone in the first book shows how findings are attributed by social status:

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> There is another, wondrous *Dendritis*, also from a Calappus tree, I need to mention here; I saw and owned only one of this kind. This one had been found on Ceylon in the wood of a Calappus tree which, after it had been struck by lightning, toppled over, and split down the middle. The slaves of a Dutch officer who happened to be passing by, went up to it in order to get the palmeto, and when they opened the top part of the trunk with their cleavers, they found this little stone embedded in the wood in such a way that one certainly had to conclude that it had grown there, whereafter they gave it to their master, who was a Dutch Captain, a curious and trustworthy man, who later honored me with it […]. (Ref. 13, Book I, Chapter 3, p. 217)

This example points to Rumpf's practice of compiling information and the scope of his own learning in relation to contributions by people he encountered, a pattern that was not necessarily tied to geographical distance. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century biographical approaches he was regarded as a linguist because the *Ambonese Herbal* in particular contains so many references to both European and Asian languages. This should be seen against the backdrop of the ethnic diversity that Markus Vink has described: '[…] foreign-born slaves decisively outnumbered the creole slaves born locally into servitude. These foreign-born slaves came from a variety of cultural backgrounds and hence were internally divided along ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines' (Ref. 10, p. 170). If 55 to 60% of the population of Kota Ambon in the seventeenth century consisted of enslaved people,[14] and Rumpf was in a privileged position as merchant and counsellor, then he would have been able to quickly collect or extract this vocabulary. Next to slaves, sailors might have been an important oral source for Rumpf as well, especially regarding the smaller VOC-ships connecting the Indonesian islands, manned mostly with Asians.[15] The same goes for geographical information. For example, he noted that '[t]he inhabitants of Madagascar also use Tamarind daily in their food, for these trees grow there aplenty, and bear fruit twice a year' (Ref. 13, Book II, Chapter 32, p. 135). Moreover, throughout the *Herbal* he referred vaguely to plants 'brought from elsewhere' (Ref. 13, Book VIII, Chapter 73, p. 251) if he could not attribute them to Spanish or Portuguese transports or transfers from Batavia.

Apart from words, Rumpf collected stories as well, aware of botanical information preserved in narrative form that might prove valuable in the future. In one case, he chose to include a story told in a village on Ambon about the experience of a slave. Placed in the context of a natural history story, the slave seems to be the counterfigure to the scholar:

> The people from Halong tell a story of how a certain Slave from their Village found such a flower on Siree mountain, stuck in his belt, and found that his strength had increased so much that he could carry a double load of wood, until he came to a River, and while washing [himself] he lost the flower, and lost all his power again. (Ref. 13, Book VIII, Chapter 24, p. 86)

By characterising the enslaved worker as superstitious, Rumpf robbed him and many others of any authority they might have had based on their practice in handling plants and botanical objects. The disqualification of being superstitious served an additional function compared with the European context, one could argue. While it was a common trope in inter-confessional arguments, and in separating religion and

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science,[16] it fit into the efforts of a colonial taxonomy at the interface of economy and natural history as well. While enslaved workers might have been skilled craftsmen who shared daily habits with the ordinary people, as quoted above, Rumpf in his texts limited their contribution to his research to physical work, only carrying 'heavy material on their shoulders' in the colonial contact zone of the Moluccas (Ref. 13, Book I, Chapter 18, p. 305).

Locals are a major source of information in Rumpf's works, next to 'auctoritas' and empirical observation. In 68 of the 87 entries contained in the third book of the *Curiosity Cabinet*, for example, locals are mentioned as informants. Not only did they provide information such as the local nomenclature of the objects, but they also provided the objects themselves. Overall, the *Curiosity Cabinet* displays interest in the local people and their beliefs, yet the actual execution of the trade-offs is described fragmentarily and is mostly implied. This is suggestive of seeing exchanges with the local population as amicable and respectful. However, when analysing the exchanges with the locals in the *Curiosity Cabinet*, paternalism and exploitation of their knowledge seem typical strategies, too.

A lack of recognition of local people could be the explanation for the scant description of the exchanges. Like other seventeenth-century scientific texts, the *Curiosity Cabinet* makes its claims of truthfulness from the position of an authoritative first-person narrator who is equated with the author Rumpf.[17] When local knowledge is recounted, those informants are not inherently credible; they need to be accredited by the first-person narrator.[18] He also connects them to specific places, confirming their knowledge as local and thus valid (Ref. 18, p. 248).

Information from VOC-officials and European travellers is authorised by their position and the year their observation was made, as well as by their names. 'The first information came to me from Mr. Jacob van Wykersloot, former Chief of Timor, in the year 1681 […]' (Ref. 18, p. 75). Steven Shapin called this 'the credibility of gentlemen'.[19] As a consequence of their lower social rank, locals, just like people of the lower classes in Europe, are seldom mentioned by name. Exceptions are local people of rank, such as the chief of Timor Radja Salomon, Iman Reti, a priest from Buro, or the regent of a Hitu village, Ely. They did own the status of 'the credibility of gentlemen'. Rumpf's intensive contact with these three people led E.M. Beekman to conclude that Rumpf felt closer to the local population than to his compatriots and could obtain exclusive information (Ref. 18, p. 103)[20], or even local knowledge marked as secret: 'Howbeit, a man from *Maccassar* imparted a great secret to me, to wit, that these arrows serve to draw the horrible *Maccassarese* poison from the wound […]' (Ref. 18, p. 73). So, Beekman's opinion seems valid when it comes to the exclusivity of the information Rumpf was able to obtain. Yet not all secret knowledge was shared with Rumpf:

> When I inquired of several Natives from *Timor* and Rotty what kind of growth this [*Mutu Lambatta*] was, they told me so many different things, that one would think they had agreed to hide from the Dutch what *Mutu Lambatta* is and where it occurs; because I refuse to believe, that so many Natives, who all wear it quite commonly, do not know where such a thing comes from. (Ref. 18, p. 280)

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So when it comes to Rumpf's relation to and recognition of the local population, we do want to point out this underlying reproach and negative depiction here. Any recognition of a local subject coincided with their higher social status alone (Cf. Ref. 19, p. 75). While in north-western European social status was mainly connected to wealth and work, the recognition of the locals in the *Curiosity Cabinet* seems to be connected to location and to enslavement.

In the following three examples of exchange taken from the third book of the *Curiosity Cabinet*, the focus lies on asymmetrical trade-offs. The locals use the stones, minerals and fossils described there for medicine and practices connected with supernatural beliefs. In the *Curiosity Cabinet*, these beliefs are defamed as 'superstitions' (*bijgeloof*). The third book may be the least popular – among other reasons because it is scarcely illustrated – but it allows a unique look into colonisers' beliefs, especially Rumpf's commitment to Calvinism, and how he reflected on the colonised (Ref. 18, p. 102).

When reading the entry on 'Stones that happen to come from Certain Trees [&] Fruit', paternalism towards the locals becomes especially manifest. To counteract the consequences of their superstition, Rumpf takes the stones away from them:

> I knew full well that their pretense [of stones granting good luck] was nonsense […] but I took them off their hands in order to deliver those simple folk of their superstition, while I am also well aware that in war, victory does not come from such paltry Stones, but I think it advisable to get such things out of the hands of the Natives, because it will make them bold from time to time, which often causes them to wage war on us quite easily. (Ref. 18, pp. 363f.)

His motive is not to convert them. He has pragmatic reasons, knowing that the pure belief in supernatural powers granted by the stones might cost lives and money. In Europe, the rejection of superstition was intertwined with the progress of the natural sciences too, but was used against the Catholic Church and the influence of religion on the natural sciences in general (cf. Ref. 16, p. 367). In the above quotation, there is a different reason for acting against superstitious practices. If the stones were indeed able to grant good luck, the result could have been the establishment of a symmetry of power between the colonisers and the locals. By taking away the stones, the locals were kept under Dutch control and left without hope that higher powers would assist them. This example is not even an asymmetrical trade-off, because the interaction has to be described as deprivation. The report does not go into detail when it comes to how the stones were taken away. Did the locals object? Was Rumpf accompanied by a soldier or was his social status simply enough to take away the locals' belongings without causing uproar? The Moluccans had to hand over precious stones to their chiefs, as noted in the entry on the shells *Buccinum*: '[O]rdinary people may not hide it [the shell *Tsjanko*], but have to bring it to their King' (Ref. 18, p. 139). But did they acknowledge Rumpf as superior just like their own chiefs?

Rumpf was successful in the Dutch East India Company. He started as a soldier, later became a merchant and was promoted to senior merchant (*opperkoopman*) before he went blind in 1670. But even as a junior merchant (*onderkoopman*)

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(Ref. 18, p. 59) in 1657, the power of Rumpf's position is notable in the entry on the stone *Aprites*:

> The aforementioned stone had been inherited or given 3 or 4 times already within the same family, with the notion that it had the power to cause many dreams […] but its last owner gave it to me during the following occasion: some trespasses had put him in chains, and he was delivered to me this way when I took command of the coast of *Hitu* in 1660; he greatly revered the stone, […] but it would not reveal anything to him: So he became angry at the stone and gave it to me […] and knowing full well, that he had been enchained for some trifles, I removed his chains; so each one of us went home quite content, I with the stone and he with his freedom. (Ref. 18, p. 330)

This story can be read in two ways: on the one hand, the man may have been frustrated with the stone not working in his favour anymore and may have given it to Rumpf freely, who then benevolently let the man be set free. On the other hand, one can sense force behind these actions. Rumpf may have promised the man his freedom in exchange for the stone or maybe his rank was enough to give the enchained man the impression that it would be best to hand it over.

In 1673, the island Ambon was populated by 19,404 local people (Ref. 14, p. 133). In the same year, the city Ambon totalled 4089 people. This number can be divided into 1198 VOC-employees/servants and their families, 748 European citizens, 967 Chinese and 1176 indigenous citizens.[21] While these numbers suggest that the ratio of VOC-employees to local people was in balance, we have to keep in mind that servants and slaves were counted as part of the household by the VOC, and that we are talking about the town of Ambon. In the countryside, this ratio will have looked different. It is also instructive to look at the number of military men under the VOC: of the 600 stationed in the gouvernement (*gewest*) Ambon, about 300 stayed in Fort Victoria. Although the number seems low and Knaap says that a good relationship with the locals was essential, he also speaks of a military advantage of the VOC (Ref. 14, p. 37). The story mentioned above shows the power the colonisers had over the local people, maybe based on the awareness of this military advantage.

In the next example, an object is traded in for money. To judge if this trade should be called asymmetric, the price should be considered as well as the interest of both parties in the object.

> The Natives had already hidden it [a Coral rock in the shape of a woman who was identified as a drowned wife or sister of a Javanese skipper] in the forest, and would probably have made it into some idol: Because the *Moors* who now live below *Halong* reckon that they descend from the aforementioned skipper; but I cleverly got that figure out of their hands by paying them 1 Rixdollar, and it makes a fine show now in my garden […] (Ref. 18, pp. 365 f.)

The locals value the object for its supernatural powers and historical meaning, while Rumpf as a collector values its aesthetics. Maria-Theresia Leuker remarks that '[t]his difference concretely illustrates the process of cultural appropriation: in return for payment the native cult object can become a rarity in a European collection. Rumphius' descriptions contain an implied sense of his own cultural superiority'.[22]

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In the case of the stone (formation) mentioned above, the collection is not inside a cabinet but in Rumpf's garden. How much was its decoration worth to Rumpf? One Rixdollar seems little. By comparison: in the eighteenth century, a junior merchant under VOC-command earned 36 guilders per month, which translates to 14.4 Rixdollars.[23]

Overall, the *Curiosity Cabinet* displays interest in the local people and their beliefs, yet exchanges with the local people are seldom described explicitly. As stated above, the 'credibility of gentlemen' and the consequent lack of recognition for local people could be the explanation. Nevertheless, the examples analysed here raise questions about the claim that Beekman made of an exclusively positive attitude towards the locals. They indicate the presence of an underlying colonial power too, as the objects in the examples are traded for money or personal comfort or are simply taken away. The colonisers patronise the locals and exploit their knowledge and belongings. While the actual execution of the trade-offs in the *Curiosity Cabinet* is described only fragmentarily and much is left unsaid, local knowledge, often kept secret, and the objects of worship may have been easily gathered thanks to Rumpf's good standing with the locals. But as the examples show, the trade-offs are also asymmetrical.

Rumpf recorded a social space that was influenced by processes of enslavement and commodification in the wider Indian Ocean World. The process that Carolien Stolte has analysed for orientalist Dutch writings on India holds for Rumpf's texts as well; as they 'were translated and reproduced, intact or broken up and reassembled in new compilations, they gained a wider European audience'.[24] Information contained within the *Curiosity Cabinet* as well as the *Herbal* was authorised both by the figure of Rumphius as a natural scholar within the European Republic of Letters, and by its materialisation as a printed book. Other than information from handwritten archival sources, this form of colonial knowledge – edited, standardised in form, transportable, and accessible to the public – could be taken for stable and real beyond the social space of the VOC-regime around 1700.[25] Thus, we come to the tentative conclusion that the embodied asymmetrical and forceful relations with enslaved workers and local common people as expressed in the texts could be reproduced intellectually in Central European cultural spaces such as libraries and academies.

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