

Locals, Knowledge and Force.

Rumphius' *Rariteitkamer* and *Kruid-boek* as Colonial Contact Zones

In the second half of the 17th century, Georg Eberhard Rumpf from Hanau in 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 Oostindische Compagnie*, VOC), he had married a local woman and chose not to return to Europe. After he had written a history of Ambon that focused on the political ecology of the Moluccas during colonization, the VOC granted him time, books and services to research wildlife in the region. Authored under the latinised Rumphius, his biological opus was published in the first half of the 18th century in Holland, the *Amboinsche Rariteitkamer* (Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet) in 1705 and the *Amboinsche Kruid-boek* (Ambonese Herbal) from 1740 onwards. Highly influential in contemporary European conchology and botany, both books also belong to the European literary canon of the Dutch East Indies, thus participating in colonial contact zones in different times and spaces.

These 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 By means of two case studies, we are going to analyse the specifics of knowledge production on Ambon and also the resulting *coloniality* as it was transported in Rumpf's texts, which were widely circulated across Europe. The first case study (Arens) draws on the Ambonese Herbal and addresses slave work as one foundation of knowledge production in colonial territories, connecting the human body and scientific objects. How did Rumpf refer to slaves, and how did they contribute material to his research? The second case study (Kießling) draws on the Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet and focuses on locals as mediators of knowledge, specifically on exchanges that included asymmetrical trade-offs. How did Rumpf gather information from local people, and how exactly are these exchanges portrayed in his texts?

In the Ambonese Herbal, Rumpf described both the island as paradise and paradise destroyed. The nutmeg and fruit trees on the small island of Pulo-ay “are a delight to the eyes and a pleasure to stroll amongst, and they offer such a beautiful sight that the entire Island seems to

¹ Pratt: Arts, p. 327.

be one single garden [...]“² On Ambon, after 1670, the Dutch had used so much wood of the White Tree (*Melaleuca leucadendra*) for houses and ships “with the result that most of the Forests around Victoria Castle have already been eradicated.”³ The asymmetry of economic and military resources between the VOC and other local forces was not limited to the natural environment. In visual representations, such as the depiction of Banda by cartographer and water colourist Johannes Vinckboons from 1662/63, there was scarcely a trace of violence.⁴ In his text, however, Rumpf was quite clear about the consequences of colonisation on Banda:

The Nutmeg groves are no longer owned by the old Inhabitants, since they were driven out because of their numerous massacres of the Dutch Nation, especially the massacre in May Anno 1609 of Admiral *Pieter Willemsz. Verhoeven*, whereafter the Parks were divided among the Dutch and Mestiso citizenry, who have to maintain a large number of Slaves, usually 40 to 50 of them, while the large parks can have as many as 80 to 100.⁵

The history of enslavement and slave trade in today’s Indonesia and the Indian Ocean world has only recently gained more attention in the entangled fields of commemorative culture and historical research. As the editors of the *Slavery Heritage Guide Amsterdam* stated in 2014: “Within Indo-European and Moluccan circles, up till now very little connection is felt towards its own slave history, partly because this history is very unknown and other more recent historical milestones demand attention.”⁶ Or, as Reggie Baay put it in the introduction to his book *Daar werd wat gruwelijks verricht*. in 2015: “No monument, no memorial day, no discussion.”⁷ While Baay focused more on deconstructing the narrative of a supposedly benign colonialism in the Dutch East Indies, Matthias van Rossum in the same year concentrated on the economic and social structures of slavery within the Dutch East India Company.⁸ In his 2016 actualisation of the *Zwartboek van Nederland Overzee*, Ewald Vanvugt points out one of the edited and widely available 17th century source on the topic, Pieter van Dam’s *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie* (manuscript 1693–1701).⁹

At the same time that van Dam penned the details of the slave trade between Cape Town and Batavia for the managers (*Heren XVII*) in Amsterdam, Rumpf described those who were forced to work for the VOC for an academic public in orientalist and racist terms. Other

² Rumphius: *Herbal*, Book II, Chapter 5, p. 28.

³ Rumphius: *Herbal*, Book II, Chapter 5, p. 31.

⁴ Stevens: *Verleden*, p. 25: “Slaven, perkeniers, de lokale VOC-gezagsdragers en militaire bezetting: ze vallen buiten het topografische gezichtsveld.”

⁵ Cf. also Chijs: *Vestiging*.

⁶ Hondius: *Gids*, p. 18.

⁷ Baay: *Slavernij*, p. 17.

⁸ Rossum: *Tragiek*.

⁹ Vanvugt: *Roofstaat*, p. 290f.

than the Beschryvinge, which were guarded from circulation well into the 19th century, the Ambonese Herbal was edited and published in a Dutch-Latin version from the late 1730s onwards. Rumpf described the “lazy natives” of Ambon, the “wild” Alfuresse from the neighbouring island of Ceram, and the “robbers from *Nova Guinea*” who “are strong, robust people, and on top of that very ugly, since they have short, russet hair that sticks up straight, and they spread the lobes of their nostrils very wide, and they stick rings or pieces of wood through them, which only makes their natural ugliness even worse.”¹⁰ The men from today’s West Papua were alienated as uncivilised people. This passage about the uses of the Small Wild Sagueer or Nie Tree (a *Metroxylon* species) as material for spears should be regarded in the context of a 1689 decision by the company that “forbade the use of slaves from the western part of the Malay archipelago which led to a dramatic increase in the demand for slaves from eastern Indonesia and New Guinea.”¹¹

In the Ambonese Herbal, then, enslaved workers are encountered not as subjects, but as objects of observation. Rumpf mostly referenced slaves in the “uses” section, writing more as an ethnographer, noting habits regarding food and health. The first, almost casual mentioning of slaves can be found early on in the first book in a chapter on the Calappus Tree (*Cocos nucifera*), which Rumpf has designated to be the “captain of the ship”. There, he described ways to extract the oil from the fruit and notes that

[...] 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.¹²

While Rumpf did not shy away from arguing details and categorising information in the linguistic and reference sections of the lemmata 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 [...]”¹³ In the course of the books of the Ambonese Herbal, references to practices of slaves were

¹⁰ Rumphius: *Herbal*, Book I, Chapter 15, p. 287.

¹¹ Warnk: *Coming*, p. 114.

¹² Rumphius: *Herbal*, Book I, Chapter 3, p. 209.

¹³ Rumphius: *Herbal*, Book I, Chapter 13, p. 363.

explicit, while the ones to the practices of enslavement usually were implicit. For example, Rumpf wrote about uses of tamarind:

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.¹⁴

The flip side to this European perspective can be found in Pieter van Dam's chapter on slavery, which includes a list from the year 1685 about 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."¹⁵

In a similar way, Rumpf did not acknowledge slaves as informants or contributors to his scientific project. He wrote about the slaves on Banda who were "well-trained" to separate the mace from the nutmeg, and were able to "do this quite dexterously"¹⁶, but did not comment on the value of craftsmanship and tacit knowledge for business, making his research possible, nor for collecting information and objects. An anecdote about a rare stone in the first book shows how findings are attributed by status:

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 [...].¹⁷

This raises further questions about Rumpf's practice of compiling information and the scope of his own learning in relation to contributions by people he encountered. In 19th and 20th century biographical approaches he is acknowledged as a linguist because the Ambonese Herbal especially contains so many references to European as well as Asian languages. If 55 to 60 percent of the population of Kota Ambon in the 17th century consisted of enslaved people¹⁸, and Rumpf was in a privileged position as merchant and counsellor, then he would have been able to quickly collect or extract this vocabulary. The same goes for geographical

¹⁴ Rumhius: *Herbal*, Book II, Chapter 32, p. 131.

¹⁵ Dam: *Beschryvinge*, p. 669. Translation by eha. Dutch original: „De schepen dienen voor 400 slaven mede gegeven te werden: Eerstelijck 300 β tamarinde, om te dienen voor de siecken en die met scheurbuyck gequelt sijn.“

¹⁶ Rumhius: *Herbal*, Book II, Chapter 6, p. 29.

¹⁷ Rumhius: *Herbal*, Book I, Chapter 3, p. 217.

¹⁸ Knaap: *Kruidnagelen*, p. 164.

information. For example he noted that “The inhabitants of Madagascar also use Tamarind daily in their food, for these trees grow there aplenty, and bear fruit twice a year.”¹⁹, and throughout the *Herbal* he refers vaguely to plants “brought from elsewhere”²⁰ if he cannot attribute them to Spanish or Portuguese transports or transfers from Batavia. By characterising enslaved workers as superstitious, he robs them of any authority they might have had from experience and practice:

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.²¹

While slaves might have shared daily habits with the common people, as quoted above, in the colonial contact zone of the Moluccas they were limited to carrying “heavy material on their shoulders”²².

The local common people as mediators of knowledge are the primary source of information in Rumpf’s works next to *auctoritas* and self-made empirical observations. The locals did not only provide information but also the objects described in the *Curiosity Cabinet*. Like other 17th century scientific texts the *Curiosity Cabinet* puts its truth claims from the authoritarian first person narrator that is equated with the author Rumpf.²³ When *local knowledge* is recounted, the informants are accredited by the first person narrator and are not inherently credible. The narrator makes use of affirmations: “I have come to understand from credible eyewitnesses [...]”²⁴ The informants are also provided of a localisation, which confirms their knowledge as local and thus valid.²⁵ Information from officials of the Dutch East India Company and European travellers is authorised by their position and the year of their observation as well as their names. The locals are seldom mentioned by name. Exceptions are local people of position like the chief of Timor Radja Salomon, Iman Reti, a priest from Buro, or the regent of a Hitu village, Ely. The compared intimacy of Rumpf with these three people made Eric M. Beekman conclude that Rumpf felt closer to the local population than to his

¹⁹ Rumphius: *Herbal*, Book II, Chapter 32, p. 135.

²⁰ Rumphius: *Herbal*, Book VIII, Chapter 73, p. 251.

²¹ Rumphius: *Herbal*, Book VIII, Chapter 24, p. 86.

²² Rumphius: *Herbal*, Book I, Chapter 18, p. 305.

²³ Nate: *Wissenschaft, Rhetorik und Literatur*, p. 107.

²⁴ Rumphius: *Curiosity Cabinet*, p. 242.

²⁵ Bv. “One of my servants, who was born in *Ludo* or *Tulubo* [...] told me[...]”, “An Ambonese citizen, who was born in *Makkassar*, tells us [...]” and “This is contradicted by a story told by the son of a Chinese who lives in *Makkassar*, who said that [...]”. Rumphius: *Curiosity Cabinet*, p. 247f.

compatriots and was able to learn exclusive information.²⁶ I share Beekmans opinion when it comes to the exclusive information Rumpf was able to obtain. The local knowledge is often marked as secret but is still told to Rumpf: “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 [...]”.²⁷ When it comes to Rumpf’s relation to and recognition of the local population, I do however want to point out the high social position of the locals mentioned by name when people of a lower social rank are not mentioned by name. Not all exchanges with the local population are portrayed as amicably and respectful as Beekman describes. When analysing the exchanges with the locals in the Curiosity Cabinet paternalism and exploitation are characteristics, too.

I will focus on three examples of exchanges that show asymmetrical trade-offs. All three examples of trade-offs come from the third book of the Curiosity Cabinet that deals with stones, minerals and fossils. The locals use the stones, minerals and fossils for medicine and see them closely connected to supernatural beliefs. In the Curiosity Cabinet these beliefs are defamed as “superstitions” (*bijgeloof*). The third book of the Curiosity Cabinet may be the least popular – among other things because of the few illustrations – but it allows a unique look into colonizers beliefs, especially Rumpf’s commitment to Protestantism, and how he encountered the locals and their beliefs.²⁸

When reading the lemma on *Stones that happen to come from Certain Trees [&] Fruit* the paternalism towards the locals becomes clear. Rumpf does not agree with their superstitions and to counteract them he takes the stones away from them:

I knew full well that their pretense [of stones granting good luck] was nonsense, nor did I see anything unusual or rare about those Stones, 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.²⁹

By taking away the stones Rumpf tries to free the locals from their superstitions by force. But his motive is not to convert them. He has pragmatic reasons, knowing that the pure belief in supernatural powers granted by the stones make the locals wage war on the colonisers more easily, what would be paid with lives and money. He keeps the locals controlled by taking away the stones and leaving the locals without hopes on higher powers to assist them against

²⁶ Beekman: *Introduction*, p. ciii.

²⁷ Rumphius: *Curiosity Cabinet*, Book I, p. 73.

²⁸ Beekman: *Introduction*, p. cii.

²⁹ Rumphius: *Curiosity Cabinet*, Book III, p. 363f.

the colonizers. In this example, one cannot even speak of an asymmetrical trade-off, because nothing was traded and 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? Were voices raised, enraged glances exchanged or other indications of force visible? Was Rumpf accompanied by somebody, or was his mere social stand enough to take away the locals belongings without causing uproar?

Rumpf was successful in the Dutch East India Company. Starting as a soldier he changed into the branch of merchant and was promoted to the highest rank, senior merchant (*opperkoopman*) before he went blind in 1670. But even as junior merchant (*onderkoopman*)³⁰ in 1657 the power of Rumpf's rank is notable in the lemma on the stone *Aprites*:

The aforementioned stone [an *Aprites*] 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, saying that he had noticed that the stone would no longer serve him or his family, the way it had done in the past: [...] 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.³¹

This story can be read two ways: On the one hand, the man may have been frustrated with the stone not working in his favour anymore and given it to Rumpf freely, who benevolently let the man be set free. On the other hand, one can sense force behind this actions. Rumpf may have promised the man his freedom in exchange with the stone or maybe his rank was enough of giving the man the impression that it would be a good move to hand over the stone. Either way, the story makes obvious that the locals were at the mercy of the colonizers.

In the next example the object, a precious stone formation, is traded in for money. To judge if this trade should be called asymmetric, the price is to 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 with half a body 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; and afterwards there grew various small plants and

³⁰ Beekman: *Introduction*, p. lix.

³¹ Rumphius: *Curiosity Cabinet*, Book III, p. 330.

flowers from the selfsame body, because I had put seeds for them in the hollow little holes.³²

The locals value the object for its supernatural powers and historical meaning; Rumpf as collector values only its aesthetics. Maria-Theresia Leuker makes this cultural difference a subject of discussion in her article on *Knowledge transfer and Cultural Appropriation* (2010): “This 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’s descriptions contain an implied sense of his own cultural superiority”.³³ In the case of the stone formation mentioned above, the collection we speak of is not inside of a cabinet but in Rumpf’s garden. But how much was the decoration of his garden worth to Rumpf? In the Curiosity Cabinet prices for natural objects and curiosities vary from one Rixdollar or less up to 11,000 Rixdollars for a piece of *Ambra Grysea*.³⁴ The exchanges also work the other way around: in at least one lemma objects are used to trade for slaves.³⁵ One Rixdollar thus seems little. In comparison: in the 18th century a junior merchant under command of the VOC earned 36 guilders per month what translates to 14.4 Rixdollars.³⁶

Recapitulating, the exchanges with the locals in the Curiosity Cabinet have to be seen in the light of an underlying colonial force. The objects in the examples are traded for money or personal comforts or are simply taken away. The colonisers patronize the locals and exploit their knowledge and belongings. The power of the colonisers arises from their social rank, wealth and command. The actual execution of the trade-offs is inaccurately described in the Curiosity Cabinet and much is left unsaid. The often secret local knowledge and the worshipped objects may have been easily gathered thanks to a good relationship of Rumpf with the locals. But as the examples show, the trade-offs are also asymmetrical and are characterised by force.

Rumpf recorded a social space that was characterised by processes of enslavement and devaluation, imprisonment and commodification. 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

³² Rumphius: *Curiosity Cabinet*, Book III, p. 365f.

³³ Leuker: *Knowledge transfer and Cultural Appropriation*, p. 158.

³⁴ Rumphius: *Curiosity Cabinet*, Book III, p. 295.

³⁵ Rumphius: *Curiosity Cabinet*, Book III, p. 281.

³⁶ Bruijn & Gaastra: *The Career Ladder to the Top of the Dutch East India Company*, p. 226.

gained a wider European audience.³⁷ Information contained within the Curiosity Cabinet as well as the Herbal was authorised both by the figure of Rumphius as natural scholar within the European academy, and by its materialisation as printed book. Other than information from handwritten archival sources, this form of colonial knowledge could be taken for stable and real beyond the social space of the VOC-regime around 1700.³⁸ Thus, the asymmetrical and forceful relations with enslaved workers and local common people that are contained within the texts could be reproduced in Central European contact zones such as libraries and academies.

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³⁷ Stolte: *Encounters*, p. 162.

³⁸ Cf. Jeurgens: *Networks*, p. 99.

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