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Claiming their Rights? Indian Sailors under the Dutch East India Company*

Matthias van Rossum

Late April 1747, Batavia. On a plank covered with a mat made of leaves, the dead body of an Indian sailor was laid down by his fellow workers. The sailor, known by the name of Jantje, was originally from Bengal and had worked as a rower in the service of the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie: VOC) on the waterfront of Batavia. Mourning his death, the Indian sailors publicly and purposely 'displayed' Jantje's dead body 'to the *ploezerscasie*' – the rowers department.¹

The day before Jantje died, the sailors of the *ploezerscasie* were summoned to work some vessels through the waterway of the port. In the afternoon and late in the evening, they had to row ships out to sea and others back in to Batavia. Jantje was part of the crew under the command of the provisional quartermaster, Leendert Willemsz de Quaadsteniet, from Puttershoek (in the Dutch Republic). As the responsible officer of the *ploezerscasie*, boatswain Jan Baptist Commere, from Ghent, was overseeing the workplace.²

Before the *Raad van Justitie* (Court of Justice) of Batavia, Leendert declared that he had been working as a quartermaster after his third arrival in Batavia two years ago.³ He stated that he 'had always had the command over Moors in that function'. The term 'Moors' was, in the context of the VOC, mainly used for people from the Indian subcontinent. Indian sailors were often called 'Moor sailors', referring to sailors from a Muslim as well as a Catholic background.⁴ According to him, he never received complaints 'from any of these men for his severity or harsh treatment'. Leendert did not want to 'deny that he sometimes punished those who deserved it with the *rotting* [wooden stick]'. He stated, however, that he had 'always commanded them with restraint'.

The Indian sailor Lourens, the *sarang* Calé and the *tandels* Nassir and Rohim gave a completely different account. The ranks of *sarang* and *tandel* were equal to that of the petty officers boatswain and quartermaster, overseeing crews of Indian sailors. The accounts have been preserved in the criminal court records that were sent from Batavia to the Republic. The records seem to provide a mixture of paraphrases and quotes, mainly

1 in Dutch, although the Indian sailors may have provided their accounts
 2 in Portuguese or through translation. In this case, no translator was men-
 3 tioned.⁵ The officers took their oath ‘in the Muhametan manner’.⁶ Lourens
 4 swore his testimony by taking the oath ‘in the Catholic manner’, ‘proclaim-
 5 ing the words “so help me God” in the Portuguese language’.⁷

6 The sailors declared that they had been commanded to row out around
 7 noon of that day. Jantje had been the last to arrive, and quartermaster
 8 Leendert had beaten Jantje ‘with an oar’.⁸ This was much more serious
 9 than the regular punishment with a *rotting*. Once they were ‘in the canoe’,
 10 Leendert hit Jantje ‘in such a manner on the chest and other places of his
 11 body’ that ‘he lost consciousness’. The quartermaster, the sailor and fore-
 12 men claimed, ‘had beaten the oar to pieces’ and kicked Jantje ‘outside the
 13 boat’. His fellow rowers rescued the unconscious sailor from the water and
 14 brought him ‘to the *kagie*’ – the house of the rowing quarters. He died ‘the
 15 next morning, around nine o’clock’.

17 **Global workers – or early modern coolies?**

18
 19 The death of the sailor Jantje from Bengal brings together different aspects
 20 of the world of diversity and work within the VOC. It shows Indian sailors
 21 working on rowing vessels in Batavia. Indian crews would be recruited in
 22 Bengal and, later, Surat. They were placed on board Company ships engaged
 23 in intra-Asiatic voyages and employed in various kinds of work in the port of
 24 Batavia. They worked amidst sailors and soldiers from different areas of Asia
 25 and Europe. The working environment where they were stationed was com-
 26 manded by petty officers from the Dutch Republic and Flanders. Working
 27 for a worldwide trading company, these sailors functioned in a complex,
 28 globalised world.

29 As workers of the VOC, they were subject to Company law and disci-
 30 pline. The VOC, as an early modern capitalist merchant organisation,
 31 continuously sought to cut costs and increase efficiency. The Company
 32 decided payment conflicts with sailors and other low-ranking workers in its
 33 favour, accepting unfavourable solutions only when insistence would lead
 34 to detrimental results. Company working environments were organised in a
 35 hierarchical way, functioning on the basis of a harsh command structure of
 36 which violence was an integral component. The events of the *ploezerscasie*
 37 can be seen as an extreme case, but not as an isolated incident. As a result,
 38 European and Asian workers in the service of the Company were confronted
 39 with important challenges, especially concerning payment and treatment.

40 At the same time, the VOC and its sailors found themselves in an inter-
 41 national environment where they had to deal with different groups of work-
 42 ers, communities and (local) authorities. European and Asian sailors were
 43 not only confronted with each other, but also with the challenges presented
 44 by their service for the VOC. Instances of conflict and claims-making, as in

1 the case of Jantje from Bengal, provide interesting insight into the function-
2 ing of the VOC as an early modern multicultural working environment.
3 They also provide an important way to study the possibilities available to
4 sailors to represent their interests or claim their rights. This could be done
5 in informal and formal ways, and by mobilising different actors inside and
6 outside the VOC.

7 A consideration of the socioeconomic position of European and Asian
8 sailors and the working relations between them and the VOC leads to the
9 question of how to interpret the positions, possibilities and differences of
10 European and Asian sailors in the service of the VOC. In general, two lines of
11 argument are presented in the historical literature. These arguments either
12 focus on differences in the culture of work and discipline, or on differences
13 in the position of sailors within the labour market and the VOC.

14 At first sight, the relationship between the Asian crew and the European
15 (provisional) quartermaster might seem to be one of a violent clash between
16 maritime cultures. In a comparison between 'European' and 'Asian' ship-
17 ping, Pearson describes European maritime culture as being marked by
18 strong 'class and hierarchical divisions', 'enforced by draconian punish-
19 ments'.⁹ Asian maritime cultures were, according to Pearson, characterised
20 by a 'more relaxed atmosphere, with only mild punishments and in general
21 a spirit of cooperation'.¹⁰ In the broader literature on Asian sailors in the
22 early modern period, the Asian maritime culture has often been linked to
23 lower levels of discipline, larger crews and, as a result, lower labour produc-
24 tivity.¹¹ Relating this to the case of Jantje, the conflict should be explained
25 from a contrast between a 'relaxed' Asian maritime culture and a tougher
26 European maritime culture, resulting in different expectations around work
27 and discipline.

28 A second explanation might result from the literature that traces the
29 construction of the Asian sailors as 'lascars' – or 'coolies' – into the early
30 modern period. This literature emphasises that European and Asian sailors
31 occupied profoundly different positions within the maritime labour market
32 and within early modern European shipping companies.¹² Lascars have been
33 characterised as coolies – unskilled, unorganised and powerless colonial
34 labourers.¹³ From this perspective, the explanatory factors would be the
35 weak position of Asian sailors within the labour market and the VOC. Being
36 perceived and treated as lesser sailors, as coolies, Asian sailors would have a
37 more difficult time defending their interests, resulting in lower wages, bad
38 working conditions and abuse.¹⁴

39 This essay will confront these perspectives by studying the position of
40 Asian sailors, in this case mainly Indian sailors. Taking into account recent
41 findings on the rather favourable position of Asian sailors within the VOC,
42 we are led to ask which formal and informal ways were available to these
43 sailors to defend their position and claim their rights with respect to pay-
44 ment and treatment. This chapter studies these opportunities. It will outline

1 the various means available for Asian and European sailors to complain
2 about maltreatment or infringement of rights or to enhance their position.

3 This contribution will first address patterns of recruitment, work condi-
4 tions and the violence of the VOC hierarchies. This will provide a context
5 for some of the sailors' most important challenges, concerning payment
6 and treatment. The chapter will then return to the *ploezescasie* in order to
7 study the informal and formal reactions of Indian sailors. The final part will
8 study various other conflicts and actions of Indian sailors in the service of
9 the VOC in order to outline the landscape of possibilities available to Asian
10 workers to claim their rights and represent their interests, both within and
11 outside the Company.

12 13 **Working for the Company**

14
15 The VOC recruited a large and diverse maritime work force. In the Republic,
16 the VOC recruited Dutch and other European sailors from an area ranging
17 roughly from the Southern Netherlands to Germany and Scandinavia.¹⁵ The
18 VOC recruited sailors from various regions in Asia as well. Recently, it has
19 been pointed out that this occurred much earlier and more systematically
20 than established by previous historical research.¹⁶ From the early seven-
21 teenth century onwards, Chinese sailors were recruited around Formosa,
22 (1630s–1660s). For intra-Asiatic shipping, Indian sailors were recruited in
23 Bengal from the 1670s onwards and in Surat from the 1750s onwards. In the
24 second half of the eighteenth century, Chinese sailors were again employed,
25 this time mainly from Batavia. In this period, the VOC also started to
26 employ Malay and Javanese sailors.¹⁷

27 Asian and European sailors worked in mixed crews. Trying to generate
28 profits through Asian trading activities, the VOC maintained an intra-
29 Asiatic fleet that was much larger than that employed on the interconti-
30 nental route between Europe and Asia.¹⁸ In Asia, the VOC operated routes
31 in the waters between the Cape, Persia, India, the Indonesian archipelago,
32 mainland South-east Asia, China and Japan. Sailors from Bengal and Surat
33 were mainly employed on routes between India and Batavia and in the
34 Indonesian archipelago. As it was quite common for the VOC to employ its
35 maritime workforce in different kinds of work at sea and on land, these sail-
36 ors were also employed as port workers – rowers, towers, carriers, sailors – in
37 and around Batavia and some of the smaller Company settlements.

38 Recent findings indicate that Indian VOC sailors were able to establish for
39 themselves a better position than might be expected based on earlier histori-
40 cal scholarship. They were able to negotiate wages and contract terms that
41 were similar to those of European sailors in the service of the Company.¹⁹
42 During most of the eighteenth century, for example, 'Moor' sailors in
43 VOC service earned 7.5 guilders per month, about the same as the wages
44 earned by European sailors, who were recruited for 7 to 9 guilders. Younger

1 sailors started with even lower wages in the Republic. An important differ-
 2 ence was that while Asian sailors were paid according to a fixed standard
 3 wage, European sailors at the end of their contract term could negotiate
 4 higher wages (one guilder per month) by extending their service overseas.
 5 European sailors could raise their wages to as much as 8 to 13 guilders.²⁰

6 Asian sailors' negotiation position, or position in the labour market, may
 7 even have been stronger than that of European sailors and 'Moor' sailors
 8 could sometimes claim conditions that were better than those of European
 9 sailors. From April 1752 onwards, for example, Indian sailors recovering in
 10 the 'Moor hospital' of Batavia were paid half their wages. This was placed
 11 on their accounts in order to avoid complaints from families and wives in
 12 Bengal and Surat. European sailors were not so lucky; the payment of their
 13 wages was suspended completely during their stay in hospital. An attempt
 14 to change this situation would be initiated in August 1764. The recently
 15 appointed director-general, Jeremias van Riemsdijk stated that he found it
 16 remarkable that 'the Moors enjoyed more privileges than the Europeans.'²¹

17 Furthermore, even if there were differences in work cultures, this did not
 18 affect productivity. The differences between VOC ships with completely
 19 European crews and VOC ships with mixed crews of European and Asian
 20 sailors were small. On smaller ships, the differences tended to be in favour of
 21 ships with completely European crews. It seems that this was the result of the
 22 practice of employing Asian crews in groups with a minimum of eight to ten,
 23 leading to somewhat less efficient manning ratios for mixed crews, especially
 24 on smaller ships. In the second half of the eighteenth century, with the VOC
 25 employing more large vessels, the difference in labour productivity between
 26 European and mixed crews turned in favour of the latter.²²

27 This might indicate that Asian sailors were not necessarily less
 28 disciplined – or less accustomed to a disciplined working environment –
 29 than Europeans. If this is indeed the case, it seems that the 'lascar perspec-
 30 tive' of the nineteenth century should not be employed for earlier periods.
 31 In the eighteenth century, at least, Asian sailors were not just the coolie
 32 colleagues of European workers.

34 **Contracts and violence**

35
 36 The provisional quartermaster claimed he commanded his crew with
 37 'moderation'. He did so after having beaten one of his sailors severely.
 38 Although there is no uncertainty regarding the instrument (with a *rotting*
 39 or an oar) and the outcome (the subsequent death of Jantje), a brutal quar-
 40 termaster claiming moderation might appear contradictory. The violence,
 41 however, must be perceived within the framework of Company work envi-
 42 ronments. VOC sailors were almost exclusively employed through contracts.
 43 The duration of the contract of European sailors was five to seven years.²³
 44 The labour contract of Indian sailors was three years or longer.

1 Although work for the VOC was ‘free’ in the sense that most sailors were
 2 not forced into service, once they had signed a contract, sailors had to obey
 3 its terms and the rule of the Company. The terms were enforced by both
 4 legal and physical means.²⁴ Everyday violence played an important role as
 5 an incentive for work and discipline. The VOC was a hierarchical organisation,
 6 working with a top-down structure in which commands flowed down
 7 from directors in the Republic and officials in Batavia to lower officials
 8 responsible for specific settlements or work places. The maritime working
 9 environments – ships as well as the rowing quarters and wharf – were led by
 10 captains and officers (mates). The structure of authority extended to petty
 11 officers (boatswains and quartermasters), who were in direct command of
 12 the work of sailors.

13 Authority was not self-evident. Formal authority – based on the function
 14 and position of an officer – had to be emphasised and reified continuously.
 15 This was done, of course, through clothing, division of space, privileges and
 16 other ways of visualising authority. It had to be done through the behaviour
 17 of officers as well. The realisation of authority by decisive and convincing
 18 leadership was crucial for the position of captains, mates, boatswains and
 19 quartermasters.²⁵

20 The use of physical means was also an integral part of leadership. The
 21 rope, stick and *rotting* were standard tools for officers and petty officers.
 22 This did not mean that violence was random or that the power of officers
 23 was unchecked, but it did result in physical and violent ways of exercising
 24 leadership.²⁶ This was often emphasised in published accounts of sailors.
 25 Jacob Haafner, who in his early years had worked for the VOC as a ship’s
 26 boy and cabin mate, mentions ‘that one should not judge a captain on his
 27 behaviour on land.’ At sea ‘is where one really learns to know a captain. That
 28 is where they are in their element’. According to Haafner, there they had
 29 ‘almost unchecked power over their crews, either given to them or taken by
 30 them’. This power ‘provided them with the freedom to live as they wish’.²⁷

31 The German Elias Hesse portrayed an even grimmer picture in his pub-
 32 lished travel account based on his experience with the VOC in the second
 33 half of the seventeenth century. He described a tyrannical situation in
 34 which captains could randomly punish their sailors and soldiers:

35
 36 How unreasonably and without Cause our Captain, whom I have some-
 37 times called a Tyrant, would begin to order punishment for those poor
 38 Soldiers and Sailors on the Ships is hard to describe; often those Sailors,
 39 who drank only one Sip of Wine too much, were bound to the main
 40 Mast and dealt 200 to 300 or more Lashes with a Rope, after which the
 41 Punished would often fall to the ground as dead, but this Misery would
 42 to no extent bring the ruthless Captain to Compassion. The Soldiers were
 43 not much better off; in comparison to Sailors, they do indeed have the
 44 Honor and Privilege that they are not punished with the Rope, but they

1 are punished with a large Stick. They are therefore to be pitied, those who
 2 have served under the bravest Officers in Germany or other Countries
 3 and have fallen by Resignation to such a bad and miserable Condition to
 4 which they are subject on the ships.²⁸

5
 6 Such violence was not exceptional or random. It was structural, an integral
 7 part of authority in Company work environments. On the profession of
 8 violence by petty officers, Haafner says that 'a beating by one or two quarter-
 9 masters' was considered 'a very moderate punishment'. Hierarchy and vio-
 10 lence were intimately linked. Haafner wrote, 'Everyone who has anything
 11 to say, the first mate, the second mate, will command that the crew be dealt
 12 beatings. Everyone who has the right to carry an end of rope, the boatswain
 13 and his helpers, deals heavy beatings, or commands them, especially to poor
 14 Germans and foreigners'.²⁹

15 16 **Back to the *ploezerscasie***

17
 18 A certain level of violence was simply accepted as part of life in the service
 19 of the Company. This did not mean, however, that such violence remained
 20 uncontested. Let us return to the death of the Indian sailor on the *ploezerscasie*.
 21 The Indian sailors took action after the death of their co-worker, Jantje. They
 22 displayed his dead body. More importantly, they sent a complaint to quarter-
 23 master Leendert's superior. This was done by the *sarang* Calé, who reported to
 24 the boatswain of the *ploezerscasie* that it had been the provisional quartermas-
 25 ter who 'had beaten the Moor to death'.³⁰

26 The death of a sailor had to be reported and investigated. The dead body
 27 was examined by five doctors, and their reports point out the severe injuries.
 28 Batavia's city doctor, John Scott, reported that the cause of death was a neck
 29 fracture, 'probably caused by a blow attributed to the person of Leen Willemse
 30 de Quaetste niet'. The second report of his colleagues also mentions a fatal
 31 neck injury.

32 The case was brought before the Court of Justice (*Raad van Justitie*) of
 33 Batavia, the highest judicial court of the VOC in Asia. The court dealt with
 34 criminal cases – and sometimes other important cases – related to VOC
 35 employees in Batavia and its surroundings. In other Asian settlements, the
 36 VOC had local courts. The Batavian court also dealt with appeals from these
 37 settlements.

38 Boatswain Jan Baptist Commere, who was responsible for the *ploezersca-*
 39 *sie*, testified that he was satisfied with the work of Leendert. The boatswain
 40 mentioned that the evening before Jantje's death, he 'heard that the quarter-
 41 master punished some Moors by striking them with the *rotting*'. He did
 42 not witness the incident, as he was inside his house near the *ploezerscasie*,
 43 but 'thought that it had happened because the sailors had not presented
 44 themselves fast enough'. The boatswain was confident that the punishment

1 had been necessary. Commere said the quartermaster had 'always behaved
2 very well and in an orderly manner and to his knowledge never maltreated
3 anyone'.

4 The quartermaster employed a similar line of argument regarding 'punish-
5 ment' and 'maltreatment'. He even denied the whole incident. Confronted
6 with Jantje's dead body, he declared 'never to have hit or pushed him'. The
7 'regular' punishment with a *rotting* was clearly not included in this. Leendert
8 confirmed this version even after interrogation *ad torturam* – with torture.
9 Permission had to be granted by the Court of Justice for the use of physical
10 means of interrogation, done mainly in the case of serious offences and in
11 the absence of a confession. The testimony of the doctors evidently did not
12 lead to a solution.

13 Before the court, the doctors were hesitant. Dr Cornelis Everhard stated
14 'that he did not find any other injury'.³¹ Dr John Scott admitted 'not to have
15 investigated any other parts of the body than where he saw the injury'.³²
16 After a short exchange, it was agreed that Jantje must have died only a few
17 hours after the neck injury. The doctors thought it 'impossible that some-
18 one would have lived for another 24 hours after the injury'.³³ The state-
19 ment of the 'Moor sailors' should, according to the doctors, 'in this respect'
20 'absolutely' be discarded.

21 The exact cause of death could not be determined by the Court of Justice
22 in Batavia. Contradictory statements obscured the exact course of events:
23 the accusation mentions 'many irreconcilable contradictions'. The prosecu-
24 tor (*advocaat fiscaal*), however, retained the 'strong suspicion that the Moor
25 who was found dead was killed by the beating or the kicking out of the
26 canoe'. He demanded punishment by flogging and ten years' forced labour.
27 The court decided differently and released quartermaster Leendert.

28 The case shows a few of the possibilities available for Indian sailors work-
29 ing in the service of the VOC in Batavia. Besides acts of public protest,
30 they could formally address the superior of the (petty) officer accused of
31 mistreating the sailors. This could turn into a criminal court case, where
32 Indian sailors and their foremen were provided the opportunity to give
33 their accounts. This whole procedure, in the end, did not result in measures
34 against the accused quartermaster. The absence of a confession and the con-
35 fusion around the cause of death made it difficult for the court to convict,
36 and thus Leendert Willemsz de Quaadsteniet was set free.

37

38 **Petitioning maltreatment**

39

40 The death of Jantje led to an official judicial investigation. This may well
41 have been an exceptional situation. The reactions of the Indian sailors to the
42 death of their co-workers were careful. They filed a complaint to the direct
43 superior of the quartermaster via their *sarang*. Actions of Indian sailors were,
44 of course, not limited to situations that involved a fatal outcome. In the face

1 of maltreatment or perceived injustices, sailors could employ many different
 2 means to improve their position. This could take the form of direct indi-
 3 vidual or collective action in work environments – violence against (petty)
 4 officers, a strike or mutiny.³⁴ This could also take the form of desertion.³⁵

5 There were, however, also formal (legal) recourses with which to respond
 6 to violence in the service of the Company. One of these was to petition
 7 the Company. Especially for sailors engaged on intra-Asiatic voyages, this
 8 could be an important way to deal with mistreatment on board ships or
 9 complaints about provisioning and payments. The first to be addressed were
 10 the officers in charge. These instances were often solved on board ship or
 11 in other work environments and, therefore, have not left much historical
 12 source material. In many instances, complaints were directed against officers.
 13 In cases where the leading officers in a workplace, such as the captain and
 14 mates of a ship, could not be addressed for such complaints, petitions had
 15 to be directed to higher authorities in Company settlements.

16 Haafner's memoirs preserve an illustrative example of the treatment and
 17 strategies of Indian sailors. The 'brutal' captain Koelbier made 'two lascars,
 18 or black sailors' watch over the cattle on board.³⁶ The sailors had drunk
 19 from the water meant for the cattle. The captain 'came out to the deck,
 20 ordered them to be bound to the mast, lit his pipe with tobacco and made
 21 four quartermasters beat the sailors with rope until he had cold-bloodedly
 22 finished his tobacco'.³⁷ The two sailors died of their wounds.

23 Although violence may have occurred regularly, this did not mean that
 24 violence remained uncontested by either European or Asian crews. The
 25 death of the sailors led to a declaration signed by the *sarang*, the protestant
 26 preacher and some of the petty officers and crew. The petition, signed by
 27 the higher-ranked European and Indian crew members, was handed over to
 28 local Company officials in Negapatnam. This resulted in an investigation by
 29 the Council of Justice in Negapatnam, which in the end did not lead to a
 30 conviction of the captain.³⁸

31 It is important to emphasise that the declaration was not primarily
 32 directed against the use of violence. Like other complaints related to treat-
 33 ment, it referred to 'the inhuman treatment of the crew' and especially the
 34 'barbarity' with which the commander had maltreated the two deceased
 35 Asian sailors. It is directed, therefore, against the excesses and random char-
 36 acter of the violence employed; not against violence itself.

37 38 **Between authorities?** 39

40 The VOC was not the only authority sailors dealt with in Asia. An inter-
 41 esting case, occurring in 1739 in Bengal, shows the international context
 42 in which sailors operated in the service of the Company. Upon arrival in
 43 Bengal, Indian sailors working on the fleet from Batavia sent a written
 44 request to the director of Hugli, the VOC settlement in Bengal, complaining

1 about their treatment by the Company and by local authorities. According
2 to a report sent by Company authorities from Bengal to Batavia:

3
4 The Director, who was on this occasion on the fleet, made known to
5 the honourable members [of the Council of Policy of Bengal] that some
6 Moor sarangs, who had arrived here with the ships from the South, had
7 complained in writing that on Company ships they were not only denied
8 normal provisions of butter and oil and that they were treated very badly
9 by the ship's officers but that even their sick in Batavia had to pay their
10 costs besides provisioning, and furthermore, that their chests [of private
11 cargo] were stolen by European sailors when they were taken from their
12 ships and sent off for other work, To conclude, they were badly robbed
13 and detained by the Moor Government, before they were granted permis-
14 sion to take their chests along, as can be seen in the request that has been
15 handed over by them.³⁹

16
17 It was important for the VOC to solve the matter. The Indian sailors
18 recruited in Bengal were an important part of the maritime labour force
19 in Batavia and on the ships in the intra-Asiatic trade. As a result, Bengal
20 Company officials communicated to their superiors in Batavia in 1740 that
21 'they would try to work out solutions for the complaints of the returning
22 Moor sailors'.⁴⁰

23 Situations with multiple authorities could work in favour of the sailors,
24 and provided important opportunities. Sailors strengthened their posi-
25 tion by addressing local authorities in their conflict with the Company.
26 Sometimes this was the outcome of more or less accidental turns of events,
27 as seems to have been the case with an incident with the Company ship
28 *Haas* in 1699.⁴¹ Arriving in Bengal from Batavia, the ship ran aground in
29 the Chittagong river. The European crew was, according to the report, 'not
30 to blame for the accident'.⁴² The situation was used, however, by a crew of
31 'Moor sailors', 'who had deserted the previous year from the ship *Susanna*'.

32 The *Susanna* had been sailing from Batavia to Bengal with 35 European
33 and 19 'Moorish or native sailors'.⁴³ The ship ran into problems similar to
34 those encountered by the *Haas* a year later. The *Susanna* was reported to
35 have 'run aground' in the river 'during heavy weather'. It was 'leaking' and
36 'lacked ropes and anchors'. A part of the cargo had to be unloaded in order
37 to be able to rescue the ship.⁴⁴ The *dagregisters* of Batavia do not mention
38 the desertion, leaving the specific circumstances unknown, but it may have
39 been related to the accident with the *Susanna*; they may have been escap-
40 ing the danger or refusing to perform the extra work of unloading the ship.

41 The response of the runaway sailors one year later has been better pre-
42 served in the Company records. The sailors made use of the vulnerable
43 situation of the *Haas* to 'forcibly extract' the sum of 500 rupees from the
44 crew of the ship. According to the VOC, 'the Moor sailors claimed this as

1 their compensation for the wages that had not been paid on the *Susanna*'.⁴⁵
2 Company officials in Bengal were displeased. They held the claim of the
3 sailors as 'untrue' and 'filed complaints with the Deccan court'. Despite the
4 'untruthfulness' of the act and claims of the 'Moor' sailors, the VOC officials
5 wrote, 'it was not to be expected that the money would be returned' by
6 the sailors.⁴⁶ The VOC stood powerless against the sailors, who were being
7 backed up by local authorities.

8 In other instances, Indian sailors employed local authorities to strengthen
9 their position while remaining in the service of the VOC. A few years
10 after the conflict in Bengal, the VOC was confronted with a ship that was
11 returned after it had been captured by an 'English pirate'. It was sent from
12 Madras to Batavia via Negapatnam with the European 'servants and sailors'
13 that belonged to the ship. The Company officials of Batavia were satisfied
14 with this. If the ship had been sent with 'Moor' sailors and officers,
15 they explained to their superiors in the Republic, this would have meant
16 that these sailors had to be paid until 'the Company returned them with
17 a Company ship to the Coromandel'. The officials explained that this was
18 'similar to what we have to do every year with the Moor sailors, who are
19 recruited in Bengal and Surat as the result of the desertion of Company
20 sailors in that region'.⁴⁷

21 The cheapest option for the VOC would be to employ Asian sailors where
22 they were needed and to send them back as unpaid passengers at the end
23 of their contract. This is, in fact, the way Asian sailors would be employed
24 by the VOC in intercontinental shipping from Asia to the Republic towards
25 the end of the eighteenth century. The VOC was not able to do this at the
26 beginning of the eighteenth century in its intra-Asiatic trade. The demands
27 of the Bengal, Surat and Coromandel sailors were apparently backed up
28 by those whom the Company officials labelled as 'Moor judges'. They
29 demanded that the sailors be returned not as passengers but in paid service.
30 Company officials declared they had to obey this practice as they 'did not
31 want to come into conflict again with the Moor judges regarding these
32 claims'.
33

34 Conclusion

35
36 In the introduction to this essay, the death of a sailor opened up questions
37 on the position of Asian and European sailors within maritime labour
38 markets and in the service of the Dutch East India Company. In the early
39 modern period, Asian and European sailors lived and worked in a complex,
40 globalised world. Sailors in the service of the VOC worked in multicultural
41 crews, and in the course of their work they were subject to Company law
42 and discipline. At the same time, this highly diverse VOC world continuously
43 interacted with different communities, states and local authorities.
44 This chapter investigated the position of Indian sailors and how they

1 attempted to protect and improve their position in relation to maltreatment
2 and labour conditions.

3 As a result of the subaltern position of sailors, especially Asian, in the ser-
4 vice of the early modern European trading companies, the evidence for such
5 an analysis is fragmented. Various cases involving conflicts and court cases,
6 however, have made it possible to trace the reactions and claims of Indian
7 sailors working for the VOC. Unlike in the nineteenth century, Indian sail-
8 ors of the eighteenth century appear as conscious workers defending their
9 interests in various ways.

10 Within the Dutch East India Company, Indian sailors could informally
11 address their officers on issues of serious maltreatment and sometimes
12 forced formal criminal inquiry into the misbehaviour of lower-rank supe-
13 riors. There were also formal ways to address – petition – concerning the
14 treatment in Company work environments. In the case of higher-ranked
15 officers, Indian sailors could petition Company officials to expose mal-
16 treatment on board ships. In the case of Captain Koelbier, the petition was
17 signed not only by the Indian *sarang* but by European officers. The initia-
18 tion of formal inquiries or criminal cases did not always result in conviction
19 of the accused officers but may have had an important protective or signal-
20 ling function. Sending petitions to directors of Company settlements also
21 provided a method against exploitative behaviour of local Asian authori-
22 ties, as was shown by the case of the 1739 petition against bad treatment
23 on board Company ships and trouble caused by the harassment of Bengal
24 authorities.

25 Indian sailors, however, could also employ means outside the Company
26 to protect or improve their position. They did not hesitate to mobilise local
27 authorities against the VOC. In the late seventeenth century, for example,
28 the Deccan court backed sailors who deserted in Bengal and later enforced
29 payment of their wages. In Bengal, Surat and Coromandel, the VOC had to
30 deal with contract and payment terms defended by ‘Moor judges’, probably
31 local civil courts.

32 As a result, Indian sailors could significantly strengthen their position and
33 defend their interests on issues of payment and treatment. Although much
34 more historical research is needed to gain better insight into the differences
35 and similarities in work cultures across Eurasia, it seems that the contrast
36 between a supposed ‘European’ and ‘Asian’ ‘maritime culture’ might not
37 be as marked as Pearson believes. The VOC was indeed a hierarchical and
38 violent organisation, but Indian sailors seem to have been able to work
39 quite well within these disciplined environments. With more certainty, it
40 can be established that Indian sailors were not the unskilled, unorganised
41 and powerless colonial labourers they sometimes are portrayed to be. In the
42 eighteenth century at least, they were not just coolies; they seem to have
43 been self-conscious, global colleagues of European sailors, claiming their
44 rights inside and outside the Company, in both informal and formal ways.

Notes

- * I am thankful for the lively debate and valuable comments of the participants of the *Working Lives Between the Deck and the Dock* conference and especially the main organiser, Maria Fusaro. The research for this chapter has been conducted as part of a PhD project on intercultural relations between European and Asian sailors working for the Dutch East India Company (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam 2008–2013).
1. Nationaal Archief, The Hague (NA), Archief van de VOC (VOC), inventory number (inv.no). 9416, case 31. All quotations in this section are from this document.
 2. Commere was recruited in the Dutch Republic in January 1738 as 'Jan Babtisz Commere from the city of Ghent'. He started as a sailor on the ship *Steenhoven*. He died in Asia in July 1748. Source: *Database VOC Opvarenden*, <http://vocopvarenden.nationaalarchief.nl>, accessed 25 November 2014, NA, VOC, inv. no. 12954, f. 83.
 3. Leendert Willemsz de Quaadsteniet, from Pietershoek (present day Puttershoek, near Dordrecht), was recruited in the Dutch Republic in March 1737 as a sailor. He left for Asia with the ship *Ridderkerk* and returned in 1739. Leendert again signed up with the VOC almost immediately after his return. He left for Asia with the ship *Beukestijn* in January 1740, this time as an able-bodied sailor (*bosschieter*). In 1744, Leendert again returned to the Republic and in the same year he signed up for another contract. He left for Asia in December 1744 with the ship *Domburg*. He was, again, recruited as a *bosschieter*. According to his testimony before the Court of Justice of Batavia, he worked as provisional quartermaster at the *ploezerscasie* of Batavia from 1745 onwards. Leendert had signed a confession of debt at every occasion he signed up for Company service. He died in Asia, probably shortly after his release. In the Republic, it was administrated that Leendert died 22 July 1747, but it might be that this date refers to the halting of wage payments due to his imprisonment. Leendert still appeared before Court in 1748. *Database VOC Opvarenden*. NA, VOC, 6044, f. 63; 6101, f. 70; 6171, f. 40.
 4. van Rossum, 'A "Moorish World"', 41.
 5. In the case of translation, it was common that the translator and the languages were mentioned at the end of the testimony. As no translator is mentioned, it seems likely that the Indian sailors spoke Dutch.
 6. 'op de Mahomethaense wijsse, met het leggen van hun regterhand, op den alcoran'.
 7. 'op de rooms catholijke wijze met het leggen, van sijn regterhand, op het evangelum Johannes en het uijtten der woorden inde portugeese thael zoo waerlijk helpe mij god almagtig'.
 8. 'pagaij'.
 9. Pearson, 'Class', 680, 689.
 10. *Ibid.*, 680.
 11. Barendse, *The Arabian Seas*.
 12. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*; Ahuja, 'Mobility', 111–141; Fisher, 'Working', 21–45.
 13. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*
 14. This perspective is most explicit in Barendse, *The Arabian Seas*; Sutton, *Lords*.
 15. van Lottum, *Across the North Sea*; Lucassen, 'A Multinational', 12–39.
 16. This is claimed in van Rossum, *Werkers*; van Rossum, 'Intra-Aziatische vaart', 32–69. Older literature has taken 1740 as the beginning of the VOC's structural employment of Asian sailors: Lucassen, 'Multinational'; Bruijn, 'Personeelsbehoefte', 218–248; Dillo, *De nadagen*.

- 1 17. van Rossum, 'Intra-Aziatische vaart'; van Rossum, *Werkers*.
- 2 18. van Rossum, 'Intra-Aziatische vaart'. In the seventeenth century, the intra-Asiatic
- 3 fleet was three to four times larger than the intercontinental fleet. In the eight-
- 4 eenth century, the difference between the two fleets grew smaller due to the
- 5 increase of the fleet employed in intercontinental return shipping.
- 6 19. van Rossum, 'Intra-Aziatische vaart'.
- 7 20. van Rossum, 'A "Moorish World"'.
21. Cited in *ibid.*, 55.
- 8 22. van Rossum *et al.*, 'National and International Markets', 43; van Rossum, 'Intra-
- 9 Aziatische vaart'. For a more elaborate treatment of labour productivity on board
- 10 VOC ships, see van Rossum, *Werkers*, chapter 4.
- 11 23. Boxer, *Zeevarend Nederland*, 130.
- 12 24. All this is explained in detail in van Rossum, *Werkers*, chapter 5.
- 13 25. The need for officers and captains to command 'forcefully' is clear from the chap-
- 14 ter 'Menselijke, onaangename en ontslagen schippers', in Bruijn, *Schippers*. The
- 15 notion that 'authority at sea was intensely personal' is also outlined in Rediker,
- 16 *Between the Devil*, 218.
- 17 26. For legal recourses available to sailors in European shipping, see Chapter 2
- 18 by Fusaro, Chapter 3 by Addobbati, Chapter 4 by Abela, Chapter 5 by Allaire,
- 19 Chapter 6 by Blakemore and Chapter 14 by Pedemonte in this volume.
- 20 27. Haafner, *Werken*, I: 152–167.
- 21 28. Hesse, *Goldbergwerke*, 23, my translation.
- 22 29. Haafner, *Werken*, I: 167. The link between authority and violence seems to be
- 23 confirmed by the material presented in Worden, "Below the Line", 702–730.
- 24 30. NA VOC, inv.no. 9416, case 31. All quotations in this section are from this
- 25 document.
- 26 31. 'segd zoo hem voor staet geen andere quetsing aen het lighaem gevonden te
- 27 hebben.'
- 28 32. 'verder te hebben besigtigt als op de plaets daer de dislocatie was.'
- 29 33. 'volstrekt onmogelijk'; 'dat iemand na soo een ontfangene exarticulatie 24
- 30 uuren daer aen nog soude konnen hebben leven'.
- 31 34. On lascars on English East Indiamen and on country ships: Jaffer, "Lord". On
- 32 Balinese slave sailors working on the VOC ship *Mercurus*: van Rossum, "Amok!"
- 33 35. van Rossum, *Werkers*, chapter 7.
- 34 36. Haafner – living in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – was a
- 35 Company servant and later a critic of colonialism. He seems to have been one
- 36 of the first to employ the word 'lascar' in the Dutch language as a way to refer
- 37 to Indian sailors. The VOC and its employees commonly used other words, like
- 38 'inlands' 'moor' or 'jakker'. It is important to note that Haafner worked under the
- 39 English administration in Madras for some time. See van Rossum, 'A "Moorish
- 40 World"', 54; Veth, *Uit Oost en West*.
- 41 37. Haafner, *Werken*, I: 152–153.
- 42 38. *Ibid.*, I: 152–153, 158–159, 166–167.
- 43 39. 'Den heer directeur bij deze gelegenheid op het chapiter den schepen geraakt
- 44 [verzende] zoo gaf zijne EE agtb: de leden kennisse toe eenige met de
- Zuijdscheepen alhier aangekoomene Moorse sarangs bij beschrifte waren klagtig
- gevallen dat aan hen niet alleen op 's E: Comp: scheepen de gewoone randsoe-
- nen van Boter en Olij onthouden en zij door de scheepsofficieren zeer kwalijk
- getracteerd werden, maar zelfs hunne zieken te Batav: boven het randsoen nog de
- kostpenningen, mitsg:s hare kisten van de Europese mattrouwen bestolen wierden

- 1 bij voorval dat men hen van haare bescheijden bodems kwam te pressen en tot
 2 andere diensten aftezenden en eindelijk dat ze op hun arrivement in Bengale
 3 door de moorse regeering zeer geplukt en lange opgehouden wierden voor en
 4 aleeer ze premissie konden erlangen om hunne kisten mede te nemen invoegen
 5 zulx nader kan gezien werden bij het door hen overgeleverde request.' NA, VOC,
 6 8787, ff. 741–742.
- 7 40. Coolhaas *et al.* eds, *Generale Missiven*, X: 477. Original (paraphrased by source
 8 editors): 'Men zou trachten de klachten van de teruggekeerde moorse zeelui te
 9 verhelpen'.
- 10 41. Coolhaas *et al.* eds, *Generale Missiven*, VI: 126.
- 11 42. Information on the European crew can be found in NA, VOC, 11715, ff. 134–136.
 12 The ship sailed from Batavia to Bengal with 40 European sailors. Coolhaas *et al.*
 13 eds, *Generale Missiven* mention that 'de Haas verviel in 1699 bij het naar Bengalen
 14 varen in de rivier van Chittagong buiten schuld der opvarenden' (VI: 126).
- 15 43. NA, VOC, 11714, f. 142–4. The muster role mentions '19 Moorse of Inlandse
 16 mattroosen'.
- 17 44. Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI), Archief van de Gouverneur-Generaal
 18 en Raden van Indië, 2518, f. 686. The marginalia of the *dagregisters* of Batavia are
 19 available online: <http://www.sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id>, accessed 25 November
 20 2014.
- 21 45. Considering that the 19 'Moor' sailors earned 7.5 guilders per month, the sum
 22 of 500 rupees equals a bit more than four months of wages. Coolhaas *et al.* eds,
 23 *Generale Missiven*, VI: 126. The report states: 'aldaar geweldelijk afgedrongen voor
 24 de gagie, die eenige 't jaar te vooren van de Susanna aldaar gedeserteerde Moorse
 25 matrosen na hun voorgeven alsnog van de Comp. soude hebben gecompeteert'.
- 26 46. Coolhaas *et al.* eds, *Generale Missiven*, VI: 126; 'waarvan, onangesien dies
 27 onwaarheyte ende de klagten, die men ten hove tot Decka daarover stont te doen,
 28 egter geen restitutie te verwagten is.'
- 29 47. Coolhaas *et al.* eds, *Generale Missiven*, VI: 183; 'Dat nu dit sloopje met 's Comp.
 30 bedienden en zeevarende van Madras na Nagapatnam ende vervolgens na Batavia
 31 gebragt is geworden, was ook nodig, niet alleen om de bovengemelte reden van
 32 den stormtijd, maar wel bijzonderlijk omdat, ingevalle sulks met Moorse stier-
 33 luyden ende matrosen geschiet was, deselve alsdan d'E.Comp. ten laste gebleven
 34 soudon zijn, totdat wij se weder met 's Comp. schip na Choromandel overgevoert
 35 soudon hebbon, even gelijk wij alle jaren moeten doen ontrent de Moorse zeeluy-
 36 den, welke vermits het deserteren van 's Comp. matrosen in Bengalen en Souratta
 37 meermalen gebuurt moeten werden, tenware wij na desen daarvan niet weder
 38 wilden gerieft zijn ofwel over hare praetentiën met de Moorse regters overhoop
 39 raken.'
- 40
 41
 42
 43
 44