3

Collaboration, Trade, and Colonialism

The Commons of Exploitative Collective Action

Chris Nierstrasz

Abstract

Long-distance trade between Europe, the East Indies, and East Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would not have been possible without extensive collaboration between Europeans and Asians. Although some Asian rulers chose not to engage with the Dutch East India Company (VOC) or to restrict their interactions solely to trade, some collaborated fully, thereby setting into motion a trajectory that ultimately led to Dutch domination in the area. However, neither party would have defined domination as the desired outcome at the onset. After an initial collaboration was established, mutual dependency sustained mutual gains and led parties either to reinforce their bargaining positions through sustained collaboration or to break free and search for other collaborative partners. Colonial control became possible once the initial cooperation created a codependency between parties, which led to the construction of further, mutually beneficial goals. Collaboration was not organized in a "commons," but through a system of a writing down a formal virtualization of a shared goal or mutual future. Once the VOC had the power to select with whom they would collaborate and had a dominant position in stipulating the outcomes, colonial exploitation became possible.

Introduction

The extensive discussions at this Forum (see Chapter 16, this volume) highlight the way in which historians should approach understanding how societies use and view their own history. They also cast new light on history as a scientific endeavor and change how we should interpret past human behavior as revealed through written documentation. If humans are truly "intrinsically collaborative," then all humans should be able to understand the language of

collaboration, regardless of cultural and linguistic differences. This means that understanding collaboration not only sheds new light on why people communicated certain information in the past, but also on how it should be understood today. This would make the model of the mechanisms of collaboration, developed in Chapter 16 (this volume), a valid instrument to use today as attempts are made to understand past events as well as the function that past narratives serve. In fact, the goal of thinking historically itself is set in a new light by the model.

Historical thinking and its narratives involve more than just archiving valuable memories from the past or avoiding earlier mistakes. It requires us to make sense of people's motivations (our own as well as others) and to create an idea of what might have happened (see Chapter 16, this volume). Both are necessary to build a sense of a shared belonging as well as to help in contributing positively to the future as a group. In a way, the past is not "another country, where they did things differently"; history is a tool that can help us find inspiration and justification to visualize possible futures and practice mentalizing about the motives of others.

Accordingly, historical narratives aim at initiating vicarious and instrumental collaboration. Imagined shared great pasts and great achievements, true or false, have the power to inspire renewed collaboration in the future. Historical narratives can also generate "collaboration for the sake of collaboration" or prepare us for future engagement in a world where collaboration is required. In other words, visions of the past can be an opportunistic way to create "ontological commitment" and "trust" within a specific group of people or communities through visualizations of imagined shared pasts and futures (see Chapter 16, this volume).

The differing ways in which the past is understood present a problem for our object of study in this chapter, as its history is contested. Here, we focus on the embryonic phase of Dutch colonial history; namely, on the arrival of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in present-day Indonesia. This was the start of a shared history between present-day Netherlands and Indonesia. In both societies, this mutual past, which lasted several centuries, is still present, although past collaborations collapsed in a painful and bloody process of decolonization. Both societies have moved on and use the past to inform how they interact with each other—both in the present and in the future. The past also informs what it means to belong to a society. Yet both societies represent the embryonic phase of this colonial past differently, which leads to conflicts and contestations over this shared past.

Why is colonial history and its decolonization such a story of contestation and conflict? The collaboration that once existed has broken down. Part of the Dutch group is stuck in an old discourse of colonial legitimization, which has continued over the ensuing years and is often used to create pride and trust for those who remain in this group, despite new discourses that have been added over time. The Indonesian group refutes this discourse and the colonial legitimization assigned to it and constructs instead a different narrative of the

past that is more in line with building trust within their group. Decolonization affords them the right to visualize and mentalize their future, as a way of cementing collaboration within their present-day group. Both visions put little emphasis on collaborations in the colonial era: One group views its imperial expansion to be the result of the actions of great men and cultural and technological superiority. The other group emphasizes its strength, in the form of continued resistance against an exploitative colonial regime over time. This leads to an interesting paradox: Given the outcome and collapse of the colonial collaborations, understanding the past as a collaborative history in both cases is undesirable and contested. In this sense, the collapse of the collaboration stands in the way of viewing or imagining the colonial past as a collaborative process.

In contrast to contemporary discussions about this contested colonial past, the scientific historiography has long emphasized collaboration as a precondition for the start of a colonial empire. However, collaboration is often predicated on wanting to obtain something that another group can give, a more practical and material vision of instrumental collaboration. In a more sophisticated model of collaboration (see Chapter 16, this volume), collaboration aims to solve a complex problem that surpasses the capacities of individuals. In this process, humans use mental tools, such as virtualization and mentalization, to construct mutual goals and garner trust. Viewing collaboration from a historical perspective provides a new lens through which to study colonization, decolonization, and globalization. As collaborative efforts stretched across the globe, surpassing cultural and linguistic boundaries, at a time that lacked modern modes of communication, production, and transport, collaboration became *the* tool to solve problems.

This means, however, that we have to let go of the present-day public discussion of the colonial period and decolonization and apply the model developed in Chapter 16 (this volume), which places collaboration in the middle of the enquiry itself.

If the collaborating actors of the age would have grasped the reasons for the future collapse of collaboration centuries later, they probably would have thought twice before engaging in the collaboration. It is also important to stress that the different groups and individuals certainly did not mutually agree to construct a European colonial empire. Yet over time, their initial collaboration—born out of their own will to help each other solve certain complex problems that they were facing—led to "the interactive emergence of European domination" (Wills 1993). Why did groups in the Indonesian archipelago decide to start collaborating with the VOC, even though from our present-day perspective of colonial exploitation this was clearly against their long-term interest? What can we learn about collaboration from their experiences?

This chapter builds on what has already been said about this collaboration in the historiography and tests whether it can pass through the prism of our own model (see Chapter 16, this volume). Can we find instances where both parties tried to mentalize about the other? Did both parties visualize a shared

future? Did they attempt to create islands of institutional stability and trust to enable the collaboration to thrive over time?

If collaboration is really innate and follows the model advanced at this Forum, we should be able to find such instances, even though the collaboration took place between peoples who had difficulty understanding each other due to cultural and linguistic differences. We begin by looking at whether there were any complex problems that the VOC and Indonesian rulers could only solve together, which might have initiated collaboration. Next, we ask how they tried to institutionalize their collaboration to permit the creation of stability and trust. Finally, we explore why all this led to exploitative collective action and colonialism by extending our view to collaborations beyond the political sphere.

Why Collaborate?

For humans to consider working together, they need to be presented with a complex problem that they cannot solve on their own. Most historians do not search for such a complex practical problem, but rather measure the explicative value of the past in making visible change over time. Consequently, the history of the VOC and its interactions around the globe is often evaluated in relation to radical socioeconomic transformation and political outcomes that took place, such as the Industrial Revolution and the rise of European Colonial Empires in the nineteenth century. The value of focusing on radical transformations in the past, rather than on complex problems, is that it helps historians explain the world in which we currently live. For instance, by the end of the eighteenth century, the volume of goods transported annually around the Cape of Good Hope is said to have comfortably fitted into the container of a single modern-day shipping vessel (de Vries 2003:67). Given this limited volume, economic historians often surmise that trade could only have had a minimal effect on Europe's transformation to modernity (de Vries 2003; Emmer and Gommans 2020; Pomeranz 2001). Other historians cite armed conflicts associated with this trade as evidence of the imperialistic intent of Europe: the commercial exploits from Europe were intended from the beginning to establish colonial states (Stern 2012).

However, terminology such as the Industrial Revolution and colonial state was invented when East Indian companies no longer existed and thus could not have been used to base decisions on whether to collaborate or not. These discussions are not very relevant to this chapter on historical collaboration. The only conclusion to be drawn from these narratives after the event is that the human capacity to mentalize about others and to visualize or predict the future is limited and imperfect. Nobody foresaw the long-term future as it would play out at the start of the collaboration. This indicates that we are all opportunistic

in our choice to pursue collaboration, even though our decisions can have far-reaching yet unexpected consequences (see Chapter 16, this volume).

Instead, collaboration was the outcome of more pressing, quite complex problems that people at the time believed could only be solved by working together. The societies under study differ from present-day societies. The means of transport and production were not yet mechanized, so collaboration was essential to solve problems associated with long-distance trade without recourse to technological innovations. There was also no colonial state or a colonial army to resolve conflicts. All actors simply faced problems for which the solution had to be found in collaboration. What were the complex problems faced by the different parties? We will first focus on the VOC, as it had the most problems to solve and the most to gain from collaboration. Then, we will see that rulers of islands of Southeast Asia, in turn, had their own particular problems to solve.

As of 1600, the Dutch pre-companies (i.e., those that preceded the unification of the VOC by the Dutch state) faced many complex problems as they followed the Portuguese and the Spaniards to Asia around the Cape of Good Hope. They needed to resolve the problem of organizing long-distance trade and shaping their interaction with Asians. There was also the prospect of armed conflict with the Portuguese if voyages to Asia were undertaken. The pre-companies did not have a definitive answer to this problem as they competed among themselves for profits. They were also susceptible to violence by the more united efforts of the Portuguese.

To resolve these vulnerabilities, the Dutch state wanted to merge these pre-companies into one united company: the VOC. Although the Dutch state took the lead in making this merger possible, the investors in the pre-companies did not trust this effort. They feared state interference would lead to an unduly strong focus on fighting the Portuguese, which went against potential profitability. An institutional innovation offered a solution to this problem: the VOC became the first company financed through stocks. These stocks could be sold on the Amsterdam stock exchange, another innovation, at any moment in time. When investors lost faith and the VOC would tilt toward war instead of profits from trade, they could recoup their investments. The total investment fund of the VOC stood at 6 million florins. In Asia, this meant that the VOC could push back against the Portuguese, and it made the VOC a logical partner for those rulers in Asia who were not fond of the Portuguese.

Although long-distance trade was ultimately profitable for the investors in the VOC, it exacted a huge cost on European societies. Transporting goods via sailing ships required a substantial societal investment, both in terms of human and natural resources. From 1501 to 1795, a total of 10,781 European ships sailed to Asia carrying a total of 6,731,745 tons. In total, 72% of these ships (and 75% of the total tonnage) returned to Europe; the rest engaged in intra-Asian trade or were shipwrecked (de Vries 2003). Trade also exacted an enormous financial cost for Europe: 66–75% of the silver that it obtained in the Americas ultimately ended up in Asian hands (Flynn and Giráldez 2004;

Parthasarathi 2011). In addition, because European goods did not have a market in Asia, European ships sailed to Asia almost empty, except for silver.

For the VOC, during the most lethal period documented, nearly 80% of their personnel died in Asia within two years of their arrival because of disease or war (Gaastra 2003). Overall, between 1500 and 1795, two million young men left Europe (for all East India companies combined) for Asia, and only half returned (de Vries 2003). European trade companies were granted far-reaching privileges by their home state to use violence and wage war against Asians as well as Europeans in Asia. This violence added to the loss of lives, although several companies did limit themselves to a peaceful commercial presence. In general, people from the Dutch Republic were not willing to risk their lives in the service of the VOC. The highest mortality rate was endured by the poor from German territories, who sought work in the Dutch Republic and found no other choice but to work for the VOC. Long-distance trade might be straightforward from today's perspective, but during this era, it required blood, sweat, and tears.

Despite enormous investment in the resources needed to enable this trade, the European presence in Asia was relatively small, so historians now argue that for a long period Europeans had only a very limited impact on Asian societies. Previously, over the last forty years, historians overstated the significance and relative size of the European presence, but this has been corrected. The limited number of Europeans in Asia is best illustrated by the number of men engaged by all the East India companies: between 20,000 and 60,000 European men were in Asia at any one time (de Vries 2003). To put this into perspective, the population of Asia in 1700 comprised over 400 million people, or ca. 60% of the total world population (Maddison 2001). On balance, the European presence was insignificant, especially when one considers that the Europeans did not concentrate in one geographical location but were spread out over different parts of Asia. In terms of total trade in Asia, most was conducted by Asians; Europeans did not play a major role in intra-Asian trade until the end of the eighteenth century, except in the niche market created by the imposition of monopsonies on spices. Due to their low numbers, they were also not a political or military threat to most Asian societies until at least the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Why did Europeans bother when this trade was achieved at an enormous cost and Europeans had little agency in Asia? This trade offered goods, especially spices, that gave enormous profits in Europe and Asia, although this profit landed in the hands of the few at the expense of many. Trade through the Cape of Good Hope redirected those profits away from producers and traders in Asia and the Mediterranean to the European countries on the Atlantic coast. Apart from spices, Asian manufacturers and agriculturalists provided goods that Europeans were not able to produce or that were superior and substantially less expensive than European alternatives (Berg et al. 2015; Parthasarathi 2011). To some degree, Europeans were able to choose with whom to collaborate in Asia

due to their mobility at sea, and because they had ample financial means (i.e., silver from the Americas), which gave them some agency to look for the most profitable collaborations and negotiate outcomes. Asian regions with no goods of interest to the Europeans remained more aloof of European contact.

For Asians, the challenge was not how to set up long-distance trade, but how to deal with the arrival of the Europeans. Most Asian societies, but certainly not all, were willing to receive Europeans because they brought silver to buy local goods. In some cases, European traders used the Asian goods that they had bought with silver to buy other Asian goods, although Europeans could never outcompete Asian trade in direct and open competition. To a large extent, Asian rulers were able to restrain European violence and impose their will to affect trade outcomes, as they determined whether they wished to collaborate or not. It was when they or other power factions in their societies sought collaborative relationships with Europeans in areas beyond trade that exploitation resulted, and the creation of a colonial empire became possible. Why, then, were Asian rulers, especially those rulers located in the islands of Southeast Asia, willing to construct mutual goals with Europeans that went beyond access to trade, and how did this ultimately make them vulnerable to European exploitation?

Between 1500 and 1800, the impacts by all East India trade companies in the Indonesian archipelago and India need to be understood as part of a new era of Eurasian empire building. Lieberman sees similarities between the expansion of Inner-Asian empires of nomadic horseback warriors in China and India and the expansion of the European empire in Southeast Asia during the same period. He considers them all to be part of a "second phase in a process of resource acquisition and institutional experiment" that originated in "the great Eurasian economic boom of 950–1350" (Lieberman 2009:116). As relative outsiders, the Europeans arrived in Asia looking to expand their trading empire and power base. Their rise to power depended on their ability to supersede or assimilate Indigenous groups, and success was cemented because they possessed novel military and administrative advantages. Initially, the Europeans sought to use their political and military advantage to obtain commercial privilege and were less interested in territorial conquest than the nomads. In contrast to nomadic conquests, European gains relied on naval, not cavalry, superiority and proceeded from the coast to the interior (Lieberman 2009). At the time, Europe only had a slight technological advantage over Asian societies in terms of ship design, armaments, the building of fortresses, and the use of gunpowder (Black 1994; Parker 1988).

Lieberman uses the concepts of "protected zones" and "exposed zones" to explain the different levels of success that Europeans had in asserting their priorities in reaching collaborative outcomes with Asians. The Inner-Asian nomadic homelands—the protected zone—was the home of nomadic hordes: fierce empire builders who relied on their dexterity in combat as they fired their bows from horseback. The semiarid grassland that stretched from the Mongol

homelands to Europe supplied these nomadic warriors with superior access to warhorses. The exposed zones, which were subject to Inner-Asian occupation, contained the wealthiest areas of Eurasia (e.g., China, the Indian subcontinent, and the Muslim world), and were constantly at risk of being conquered and controlled by nomad hordes and their superior warhorses. Powerful centralized states were built in the exposed zone to counteract the ever-present danger of the nomads. These well-organized states were situated in the exposed zone and had little to fear when Europeans arrived on their coasts (Lieberman 2009).

Lieberman's definition of a third zone explains European expansion into Asia and the lower probability of European colonial empire in this zone. The third zone was protected from submission by nomadic peoples, mainly due to geographical reasons. This zone included northern and Western Europe, Japan, mainland Southeast Asia, Tibet, the Himalayan foothills, and Southern India. In this zone, internal competition between states had created strong, centralized states and allowed these states to resist successfully European colonial intrusion by sea, at least until the nineteenth century. The European process of state formation was part of this more general development, although it picked up pace relatively late during this time. In a way, the military competition between European states that resulted from this process drove European expansion into Asia (Lieberman 2009).

Most interesting is the fourth zone, which consisted of archipelagic Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, and some coastal areas of southern India—regions that were very prone to European interference. Here is where the Europeans were most active and effective in their search for a privileged position in trade. In this fourth zone, they eventually established their first colonial empires. According to Lieberman, this last zone shifted from being a protected zone to an exposed zone status due to the impact of European sea power on the region (Lieberman 2009:116). Because this zone was protected against nomadic intrusion, combined with the geographically dispersed nature of Southeast Asian islands, this region had no need to develop stable and stronger states before the arrival of the Europeans. The moment that the Europeans arrived, however, many smaller states found themselves in political competition with each other for the control over people and were thus vulnerable to being played against each other by the Europeans (Lieberman 2009). The Iberians were the first to exploit this situation by positioning themselves as powerful allies in already existing struggles. In turn, the VOC carefully positioned themselves as the protectors of local rulers and powerholders, who found themselves threatened by the aggressive incursions of Portugal and Spain (Clulow 2016).

Lieberman's theory explains that the challenge Asian rulers faced in Southeast Asia was the arrival of the Europeans. Their arrival created a situation under which Europeans actively sought to manipulate power dynamics among Asian rulers. This still leaves us with the same unexplained paradox: none of the parties originally expressed the desire to pursue the creation of a European colonial empire. As the most powerful East India company, the VOC

even presented itself as a partner against aggressors who stood in the way of what the VOC considered its peaceful pursuit of trade. According to Grotius, the people from the Dutch Republic were a commercial people; they did not seek territorial imperialism but rather "honorable profit" (Weststeijn 2019:43). In this ideological view, territorial conquest exacted high costs, whereas the pursuit of trade produced profits.

Despite such representations of peaceful intentions, historians point out that the VOC was armed, chartered to fight, and did not hesitate to apply extreme violence to achieve their goals (Raben 2019). This was also their appeal to the Asian rulers, who faced local rivalries and had already either worked with or against the Portuguese for almost a century. Because the Europeans had superior naval power and skills to construct fortifications, they were sought-after allies, especially as some islands had specialized in export crops for the international market and depended on imports from other islands to supply all other goods, including subsistence goods.

The arrival of the Europeans was the complex problem that could only be solved through collaboration, and Europeans provided the best opportunity for local rulers to solve both their old and new problems of political and military strife. In presenting itself in opposition to the Portuguese, the VOC defined the Portuguese as the problem and itself as the solution.

From Commons to *Mare Liberum* and Contract Law

While the VOC and the local rulers needed each other to solve complex problems, the VOC had to resolve the complex local problems as well as manage long-distance trade. This made the VOC much more rigid in their view of collaboration and its future gains than its local allies. The institutional solution reached by the VOC has also been part of the scientific debate about commons, which are still seen today as the best solution to create long-lasting stable collaborations between people. In particular, the origin of the concept of the *global commons* has been associated with the VOC's struggle to bridge the institutional complexity involved in maintaining profitable long-distance trade between Europe and Asia.

Here I argue that it was part of the narrative invented by the people behind the VOC to present themselves as the solution and not the problem when trying to convince Southeast Asian rulers to collaborate. The goal of this narrative was to sustain collaboration successfully over time with parties in Asia. This discussion underlines how difficult it was to find fitting solutions for collaboration in complex global situations. Importantly, the discussion of how to make collaboration in such difficult situations work shows that reaching a shared understanding of a problem through a commitment to a shared virtualization of a solution can create a long-lasting commitment to a collaboration, but not necessarily through institutionalization, as theorization about "commons" implies.

The scientific concept of a commons starts from the idea that it originates when those involved in a collaboration agree on a mutually constructed goal, which they sustain over time through institutionalization. According to Tine De Moor, the historical meaning of the term is rooted in the historical setting of collectively used pastureland in Europe. This collectively owned land needed to be self-governed to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between the available land and the needs of those participating. De Moor defines a commons as "a set of well-defined and circumscribed resources (usually land) with rules and sanctions attached to them" (De Moor 2011:424). This historical view aligns with Elinor Ostrom's authoritative work on governing the commons (Ostrom 2015:1) The oldest European historical documents do not define the commons, but rather institutionalize its use. As De Moor acknowledges, these definitions are recent academic inventions.

Social scientists understand the concept of *commons* differently and have expanded its usage beyond its historical context in Europe to address more recent problems related to globalization. To distinguish it from historical definitions, which were focused on natural resources such as land and water, the term *global commons* is used today to refer to global resources that are essentially ruled by open access, including "spaces beyond national jurisdictions" (Ranganathan 2016:693). It is far easier to restrict access to relatively small resources of limited dimensions than it is to govern resources with global dimensions effectively, such as the oceans or the Internet. In short, due to the scale and complexity of such situations and the open access of many different parties and individuals, institutionalization is no longer considered a defining feature of the commons from the perspective of global commons.

Social scientists argue that in the global commons, collective action is undertaken to coordinate solutions that are accessible and broadly available. The development of global governance institutions, however, is lacking or, better put, has taken on different forms. In the commons, negotiation takes place between a limited number of participants, all of whom have a clearly defined stake in the running of the commons. In contrast, the open access nature of the global commons means that a negotiation involves a plurality of states, institutions, actors, and users with multiple interests at different levels. Due to the complicated nature of such a scenario, which seems similar to the complex situation in which the VOC found itself, no "movement toward global governance" can be found. Todd Sandler, who focused on contemporary problems of increased flows of trade "in goods and financial exchanges," points out that the collective action to resolve such problems and coordinate efforts must be derived from the actors (i.e., on the level of nation-states and multinationals), instead of one global governance institution (Sandler 2004:xi). Given the inherent complexities, achieving successful and sustainable collaboration confronts many challenges, and resolving these may require different solutions rather than an idealized solution of the historical commons.

The idea of the global commons has clear historical roots in the history of Europeans in Asia and their interactions with Asians over trade. Hugo de Groot or Grotius (1583–1645) is often credited with initiating the idea of the "high seas" as a sort of global commons, ruled by free access. Grotius published the *Mare Liberum* (1609/2009) at the explicit request of the Directors of the VOC, who wished to use it to argue for the Dutch right to have access to trade with Asia. Grotius based his argument on natural law and opposed "the claims on sovereignty over oceans" brought forth by Portugal and Spain after their discovery of the route to Asia around the Cape of Good Hope (Schrijver and Prislan 2009:168; van Ittersum 2006:XXII). Grotius argued that the seas cannot be owned or subjected to *dominium* or *imperium.* His argumentation paved the way for the VOC to conduct its commercial activities in Asia (Weststeijn 2014:13). Grotius had been hired by the VOC to juridically counteract the exclusive claim on trade with Asia brought forward by Spain and Portugal.

Ultimately, his arguments laid the groundwork for new solutions for collaboration in a global commons. His ideas of free access to the sea allowed the VOC to present itself as a partner to Asian rulers against the more aggressive policies of the Iberians. Grotius understood that no authority would be able to regulate access or institutionalize the use of the high seas by the different parties. Put simply, he wanted to move beyond Spanish and Portuguese claims, which were made on "the basis of discovery, papal donation, the requirement for mass proselytism, or similar arguments" (Clulow 2016:28). He pointed instead to the natural law principle: *pacta sunt servanda* (treaties must be honored). Such a view legitimized new mutually agreed contracts with Asian rulers, who were theoretically seen as equal partners, which reinforced the validity of the VOC's contracts with them (van Ittersum 2006:xxii). His recognition of Asian states as "full participants in a universal law of nations" was rooted in the idea of natural law, a view also used by other European trade companies to guide their interactions with Asians (Travers 2014).

The idea of peaceful collaboration in trade and violent imposition when a contract was breached were present in Grotius's basic theoretical conception of interactions between the VOC and Asian rulers. His referral to natural law cannot be separated from his ideas on "contractual obligations and their enforcement," which allowed the regulation of conduct in the absence of a judge (van Ittersum 2006). Theoretically, it made collaboration with local rulers and people possible because it was based on a mutually agreed contract: theoretically, the parties had agreed on a mutual goal. Still, it also provided justification for the use of violence against Asians should the contract not be honored. In other words, there was also a process in place of how to pursue the contract even when in disagreement. When a legally binding contract was not met, the VOC or any other contractual party could "execute judgment in his own cause" in the absence of an independent and effective judge and in line with Dutch contract law. In addition, the VOC believed that it had the right

to punish anyone who infringed on their treaties, as it considered this to be a crime (van Ittersum 2006:XXII).

What does this mean for our case study on collaboration, and how does it apply to the concept of commons? According to De Moor, the social science definition of global commons presents the risks of a loss of explanative power. Further, she argues that historians should continue to use "the more strict definition of commons, namely an 'institution of collective action' " (De Moor 2011:424, 430). In the context of collaborations between European trade companies and Asians rulers, however, this makes little sense given the complexity of the historical reality. In essence, this system was meant to create trust in a situation of political strife, while the political, cultural, and linguistic complexity made it hard for participants to mentalize about the "others'" intentions. Making a contract was, in a way, writing down the shared virtualization of the future both parties embraced.

The weakness of this system of contracts is that nobody can predict the future. What both parties hoped the outcome to be was now written down and set in stone as something that needed to be achieved. If something unexpected happened or if one of the parties was dishonest, these contracts could be used as an excuse to turn to violence and renegotiate better terms. In this manner, De Groot's vision also created the fertile ground for colonial imposition. At the same time, historians have stressed that Asian rulers, for their part, had a more pragmatic approach to the contracts of the VOC. Over time, they gave their own twist to the contracts and fulfillment of obligations was dependent on their perception of their interest. For instance, although rulers were contractually obliged to supply all their pepper or spices to the VOC in return for military support, they often only sold what they thought would keep the VOC content. They sold what they were required to supply below market prices, then sold the rest of their spices through other channels for a higher price on the open market. This would guarantee the military support of the VOC in case of necessity, but also meant that a large part of the profits of trade still went directly to the rulers. There are more examples, which we will consider later, but it is safe to say that the Asian rulers were more independent from the VOC than these contracts would have us believe and they used these contracts to suit their own goals.

My hypothesis would be that collaboration is normally in a state of flux: it evolves and grows over time, and other goals and collaborators may come into play leading to either sustained collaboration, conflict, or possibly the end of collaboration. Once a contract is signed, the fact that a breach of contract can lead to violence makes further collaboration (on old or new terms and even leading to colonial control) or a collapse of the collaboration the logical next step.

The stipulations in the contract, more often than not, remained a virtualization of desired outcome and was under constant negotiation depending on a number of variables. The collaboration could easily collapse if one of the parties defaulted on their promises, but such a default could also be considered a

new opportunity to renegotiate what was affixed in the old contract. Both sides were opportunistic as it was not clear whether such an opportunity would ever materialize, but it created some kind of stability that suited both the rulers and the VOC as they pursued their goals.

Whom to Collaborate With

Another interesting feature of these collaborations is that although the VOC is historically portrayed as the dominant party in almost all cooperations, its partners had a (more) substantial say in the mutual construction of goals, the building of trust, and the outcomes of collaboration. As illustrated above, both the VOC and its partners were more often than not highly opportunistic in their collaborative behavior. This is true for the group of Asian rulers soliciting the VOC as well as for many other groups with whom the VOC collaborated. In general, the VOC was built on collaboration with people who had less options and for whom collaboration with the VOC meant an opportunistic solution to achieve future goals that would otherwise remain out of reach. Often, the VOC presented the only opportunity for the individuals leading these groups to pursue a potentially better future.

The VOC was just as opportunistic in finding partners with whom to collaborate in the European context as in the Asian one. As discussed above, a lot of silver was needed to sustain trade with Asia. Many European thinkers objected to this drain of wealth, but it did not present a problem for the Dutch Republic and the VOC, as the goods they brought to Europe were mainly exported to other parts of Europe. This meant that trade with Asia added silver to the Dutch economy but drained it from European economies that did not have access to trade with Asia (Nierstrasz 2015). The people who died in great numbers on VOC ships were not people from the Dutch Republic. They were refugees from German lands, who in their efforts to flee poverty and war had no other possibility to obtain a job other than to enlist with the VOC. Paradoxically, the initiative for collaboration did not come from the VOC itself. Foreign traders brought their silver to the Dutch Republic to purchase goods from Asia, while German refugees "sold their souls" to the VOC.

Historians have argued that the initiative to engage the VOC in collaborations of a military nature may have resulted from actions taken by Asian rulers. Van Goor argued that rulers and powerholders in the Indonesian archipelago were opportunistic in their choice of allies, as they lived in a world of strong political competition. From the start of their arrival in the region, rulers and powerholders in the Indonesian archipelago focused on engaging the VOC in joint military action. For example, the ruler of Banten proposed a joint expedition against his local foe in return for either a part of the war booty or a shipment of pepper. Other rulers asked the VOC to help them oust their enemies

from fortresses close to their territories or solicited their help to "throw out the Portuguese" (van Goor 1986:12).

The mutually constructed goal of exchange of military protection against tribute took on a concrete form through dozens of treaties signed between the VOC and local rulers across the region (Clulow 2016). For instance, on Banda Island, the local *Orangkaya* (powerholders) were promised protection and help against the Portuguese or other foreign invaders in return for the sale of their entire crop of nutmeg and mace to the VOC. This collaboration collapsed when the VOC was unable to protect the Bandanees sufficiently against outsiders. These outsiders put pressure on the food supply of the Bandanees by isolating the islands from the sea. The *Orangkaya* of some islands started selling nutmeg and mace to arriving merchants to buy rice to feed their people, as they had not been able to buy sufficient rice. The VOC had not arrived with Javan rice and Indian cloth to buy nutmeg and spices as promised, not keeping up its part of the contract. The VOC interpreted the behavior of the *Orangkaya* as a breach of contract and reacted by massacring and enslaving the population of the Banda Islands (Clulow 2016). This shows the possible harsh consequences of the VOC's actions after a breach of contract.

Clearly, this collaboration collapsed, but in other cases, collaboration worked and was sustained over time. In Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka), the Indigenous King of Kandy was offered assistance to oust the Portuguese in return for payment in cinnamon to be harvested in regions controlled by the King. As war in Ceylon was costly, debts that the VOC incurred for providing assistance had to be repaid long after the Portuguese had been ousted; this created a backdrop for sustained collaboration (Nierstrasz 2012). The Sultan of Ternate recognized the VOC as his "protector" in a treaty and promised "not to sell any cloves to any [other] nation or people" but to supply them to the VOC for a price set by the VOC, even though other nearby rulers were also selling the spice. By uniting their powers, the VOC and the Sultan of Ternate were able to dominate all other rulers in the area and control the trade in cloves. The Sultan of Ternate also supplied the ships and manpower annually to enforce the VOC's claim to monopoly against others (Clulow 2016:29). Apparently, these rulers sought to increase their political power by assigning future trading privileges to the VOC.

Similar conditions can be found in almost all treaties signed by the VOC with rulers in this region. These treaties also contained other exigencies and demands, which both parties felt important to include (e.g., to help protect their way of life and to inhibit molestation of their wives). Due to the focus of historians on political and economic history, these requirements for future collaboration are often only mentioned in passing. Separate to the issue of conflict, many interim solutions emerged where both parties simply settled for their most important objective, making the collaboration seem out of balance. For instance, in Ceylon, the VOC obtained its commercial monopoly over the cinnamon trade, but it had to submit politically to the local ruler to

ensure access to the spice. Economic considerations appear to have been of primary importance to the VOC, whereas political issues were more important to the ruler. He simply wanted to get rid of the Portuguese, but once this had been accomplished, he was faced with enormous war debts that the VOC had engineered to last. The cinnamon needed to pay off the debts, however, was on the King's territories. In return for the cinnamon harvest, the VOC had to formally submit to the power of the King by sending yearly an embassy. VOC employees considered the bearing of costly gifts to the ruler to be a humiliating act, exemplified by having to kneel face down at the feet of the ruler. The status quo was nonetheless accepted (Nierstrasz 2012:51):

> You have learned by experience that you will find the court (Red, of Kandy) no better disposed than by flattering its grandeur and excellence, because without this, however distasteful in itself, we think it is almost impossible to obtain a satisfactory consummation of affaires, and since this is not expensive, it can be acquiesced in on all occasions.

The interests of VOC's Asian allies were no less ambiguous than those of the VOC, and contextualization is required to understand them. Vulnerable rulers were always looking for new allies to secure and enhance their position. The constant, very flexible setting and negotiation of mutual goals and collaboration were a vital part of local culture. In many ways, Asian rulers seemed to be far more pragmatic and realistic in addressing collaboration than the VOC. Political and military protection was marketed as "a vital commodity of inter-polity exchange" long before the arrival of the Europeans (Clulow 2016). Oliver W. Wolters conceptualized "the fluid nature of Southeast Asian politics" as a mandala system characterized by multiple overlapping "circles of kings" (Clulow 2016). The surrender of parts of key political rights, such as tribute or access to trade, was simply considered a part of a dynamic and everchanging struggle for power. To be certain, Asian rulers had many strategies that would allow them to escape overlordship when it no longer suited them.

Rulers across Southeast Asia were quite skilled in backtracking on earlier promises, even when dealing with the "Company's [VOC] legal language of claim and possession" (Clulow 2016). In a way, the VOC started adhering more to well-established rules in Asia rather than imposing their own vision of politics; by contrast, the VOC was the apprentice that had to adapt if it wanted to achieve its goals or understand how it could achieve them. As it engaged with Asian rulers, the VOC quickly discovered that the power base of Asian rulers was not as strong as they imagined. This enabled the VOC to exploit such vulnerabilities and to enhance its power. There were clear cultural and linguistic boundaries which probably limited the VOC's awareness of these possibilities due to the European priors that they brought to the collaborations.

Over time, this dexterity proved to be a strong point for the VOC, but a weak point for rulers. Rulers had their own subjects, yet those who owed direct fealty

to the ruler constituted only a small part of the whole population under their control. Rulers had to bind other people to themselves "indirectly via alliances with local heads, princes, or state officials, who all enjoyed quite a large degree of autonomy" (Colombijn 2003). Rulers could mobilize an army through such alliances, but alliances could be swiftly realigned in the event of political turmoil. This created a very dynamic political landscape. Stanley Tambiah referred to such kingdoms as "galactic polities, consisting of a center and satellites" (Colombijn 2003), whereas Wolters formulated the concept of the mandala as an "open, diffuse and pluriform" because rulers had limited power and needed to negotiate with other stakeholders (Emmer and Gommans 2020:260). Geertz, in turn, used the concept of the "theater state" in which stupendous state rituals were not meant to legitimize the power of the ruler, but were simply an end in itself (Colombijn 2003). In other words, a ruler was only able to demonstrate political dominance in the face of their headmen but was never actually able to achieve political dominance. Instead, power was used to create a platform for future collaboration. Pushing too hard at such events meant that a ruler might experience pushback from followers and allies (Colombijn 2003). This increased their vulnerability to attacks by outside powers.

The situation was further obscured for the VOC because the power of these rulers did not depend on a claim of land, but rather a claim on people: people were needed for production, not land (Colombijn 2003). Unfortunately, these very subjects thought similarly about power relations as did their rulers and headmen. Subjects were very mobile, and this mobility underpinned their independence. Normally, people sought protection against "human foes" and "frightening supernatural powers" (Colombijn 2003:499). If subjects and allies felt they were treated unreasonably, they could rebel and search out the protection of another ruler. "Flight was the final sanction against bad government" at all levels of society (Colombijn 2003:500). In Bantam, the *ponggawa* (local headmen) as well as commoners "sought their own benefit in defiance of supposed obligations and developed more influence than their superiors had hoped and expected" (Ota 2005:58). For the Mataram, it was a "Javanese tradition" to seek out a different ruler when a patron was felt to have developed unjust policies (Kwee 2006).

Unfortunately for the rulers, the sustained presence of the VOC meant that the VOC could ultimately present itself as an alternative pole of power to the ruler. Conflict emanated from stakeholders attempting to keep or reinforce their positions of power, and the VOC simply became part of these games. When rulers enforced the trading policy of the VOC to obtain their own goals, they often went against the interest of their subjects. When headmen or those above them became too exploitative, the commoners would simply run away, leaving behind a "wasteland" as there were no other workers to replace them (Kwee 2006). Ota describes a similar situation for Banten, where "occasionally the only way the peasant could cope with the heavy tax burden was to flee from the patron," often "seeking the protection of another *ponggawa*

or rebel without seeking a new overlord" (Ota 2005:41–42). In the case of Java's northeastern coast and Madura, some regents "appealed to Batavia to be placed under the company's protection," thus moving away from the local ruler (Ota 2005:48–49).

Once the VOC had established a solid trading or colonial presence in an Asian society, collaboration became more complex. Indigenous groups were incorporated into this empire out of their own free will or through coercion (Emmer and Gommans 2020). For instance, the VOC tapped into the thriving markets to hire Asian soldiers who were less connected to the local people; these soldiers were generally considered more loyal and had their own hopes and ambitions (Raben 2019). Chinese entrepreneurs profited from collaborating with the VOC as connectors to Chinese markets, organizers of taxation, and the producers of colonial crops in cooperation with Chinese manual laborers. The VOC also associated with other merchants to exploit the existing dichotomy between mercantile coastal areas and inland regions focused on rice production. This enabled the start of their conquest from the coast inward. The inhabitants of Batavia, the headquarters of the VOC in Java, consisted of about half slaves who worked on the docks and in the warehouses or served as retinue or in households. This is not the end of the list of actual and possible collaborations. It was here that the strength of the VOC lay in the number of collaborations that it was willing and able to maintain.

Summary

The historical example of the initial phases of the Dutch colonial empire in Asia (1600–1800) provides an interesting case study of collaboration. It also helps to give new impetus to historicizing the collaborative actions of people in the past, even though this particular collaboration might seem paradoxical from present-day views of the colonial past. Collaboration was the tool to solve all problems in a world without modern means of transport and communication. The arrival of Europeans in Asian waters, in itself the result of extensive collaboration, presented a substantial problem that needed resolution through collaboration, especially in maritime Southeast Asia. Although the VOC exemplified this problem, it presented itself as a solution to Asian rulers through the *Mare liberum* principles of Hugo Grotius, which can be considered an ontological commitment to justify the Dutch presence and win over Asian rulers. In the short term, this created a good platform for the VOC to collaborate with rulers who were fighting the Iberian powers or who had earlier lost out in this battle to reposition themselves. Implicit in Grotius' vision was the recourse to violence, when the contractual promise of a fruitful future collaboration was left unfulfilled. Such a breach of contract warranted the use of violence and already had the implication of colonial imposition. However, colonial imposition was not the only possible outcome as there were many kinds of collaborations.

The VOC had a strong preference for collaborations with people who had few or no other options, whereas many Asian rulers negotiated successfully to impose their own ways on the VOC.