

Colonial Diplomatic Relations and the Development of Pearling Industry in the Netherlands Indies, 1894-1899

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Abstract

The pearling industry that developed in the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia) had a particularly Australian character. This influence was especially pronounced during the time of James Clark and his Celebes Trading Company (CTC) consortium (1905-1918), which operated primarily in the Aru Islands of the southeastern Moluccas. However, even before the CTC, Anglospheric influence was evident in the Ordinances passed by the Dutch colonial government throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While discussions of transnational elements in pearling history have often focused on Australian capitalist expansion or pearling crew movements, often overlooked aspect is the role of colonial government policy. Therefore, this research primarily utilizes the abundant colonial archives housed in the Indonesian National Archive (ANRI) in Jakarta, focusing on documents related to the drafting of pearling ordinances. Additionally, Australian and Dutch newspaper archives obtained from online sites are also consulted. By examining these sources, this article highlights the use of colonial diplomatic networks in formulating a new pearling industry, particularly the correspondence between Dutch and British colonial officials. It also aims to understand how these diplomatic networks influenced the growth of the pearling business in the Netherlands East Indies. This research concludes that transnational forces played a significant role in shaping the legal structure of the Netherlands East Indies pearling industry. It demonstrates that the Dutch colonial state was not simply a passive actor reacting to external threats. Instead, it actively participated in creating the legal framework for pearl fishing in the region.

Keywords: Pearling Industry; Aru Islands; Australia; Dutch Colonial government; Colonial Diplomatic Networks.

Introduction

Spices such as nutmeg and mace have long been the core of Moluccas and Eastern Indonesian historiography. Yet, besides such terrestrial products, marine resources have also been a main driving force behind the “other” part of the Eastern Indonesia; Southeastern Moluccas Islands. A particular island described even in Francois Valentijn’s *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indien*, was the Aru Island group (Donkin, 1998, 284). The sea surrounding Aru proved to be a rich fishing ground for the famous *Pinctada Maxima* oyster, producing a silvery-white pearl (Strack, 2008, 26). Besides pearl, other unique natural resources harvested from Aru were teripang (sea cucumber), birds-of-paradise plumes, and edible bird nests. Hans Hägerdal has pointed out how Aruese natural

resources contributes to their unique historical position in the Moluccas (Hägerdal, 2019, 127-128). Particularly, the history of its trade networks formed by the neighboring islands.

Bordering the island of Papua to the north and the Australian continent to the south, the Aru islands have always been a meeting point between regions. Traders from nearby Moluccas and South Celebes have flocked into the island for its luxurious product, dominating their trade since the 18th century. R.F. Ellen fleshed out the central position of these traders in connecting Aru to the larger Moluccas commercial network. Initially trade pattern was centralized in Banda, with supplies coming in the form of slaves, sago, and timber to support the island nutmeg production (Ellen, 2003, 79). Eventually in the 1820s – 1840s, Makassarese, Buginese, and Chinese merchant

came to dominate this trade. This expansion was driven by the lucrative teripang trade; smoked and consumed as delicacy mainly in China (Manex and Ferse, 2010, 3). Makassar-Buginese trade network also introduced industrial goods from Singapore, such as various china, glass, trinkets, even European sugar, and textiles in exchange for a direct access to their marine resources (Wallace, 1862, 131). Such trade networks have also attracted European visitor since the 17th century, involving mainly with pearl trading.

Pearls came into attention shortly after Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie (VOC) contact with the Aru Islands in 1623 (Hägerdal, 2020, 556). But throughout the 17th and 18th century, the Company failed to control the pearling exploitation, due to their direct involvement with local socio-political dynamics. This disappointment towards pearling exploitation was then passed down to the colonial government in the early 19th century. Interest to the pearling resurge in the 1870s, only after Australian pearling ships from Torres Strait arrived in Aru Islands waters (Lehane, 2014, 221). As Dutch colonial government saw these vessels to be “trespassers”, warships were dispatched to counter the Australians (Mullins, 2010, 7). Eventually, conflicts were mediated after Parelvisserij Ordonnantie 1893 was introduced by the Dutch, in order to claim and control the access towards Aru Islands natural resources.

With the establishment of the Ordinance, Dutch colonial government came into terms with its Australian counterpart in a bureaucratic manner; in contrast to its more militaristic approach on the Outer Islands during that period. Even so, the ordinance served only as an emergency legal action to counter the trespassing problem. Maintaining naval warships to stop any future Australian vessels will undoubtedly costs expensive men and material for the colonial government. Thus, in order to secure the future of Aru Islands, a new ordinance was needed to secure government control over such resources from foreign hands.

The birth of the ordinance was therefore was therefore tied closely with resource security and control of movement in the Netherlands East Indies’ maritime spaces. Such ideas of “security”

was discussed in particular with Japanese pearling expansion in the 1930s and 40s (Rasyid, 2023, 1-10; Pangestoeti, 2022, 80-92). Furthermore, Australian maritime historian Steve Mullins prominently explores the business-commercial aspect of Australian concession in the Aru Islands (Mullins, 2019). Another work written by Julia Martinez and Adrian Vickers (2015) focusing on the transnational social history of pearling labors between Indonesia and Australia. This, of course is just a glimpse of how the industry has profound imprints upon the societal and economic landscape of the people involved within it. However, a thorough discussion of the political and international relations ramifications of this industry, is seldom mentioned and sparsely in-between.

As mentioned above, the impacts of Australian pearl-shellers in the Netherlands Indies mainly covers the influence of British-Australian pearling based on the physical connection between the two pearling zones. Such discussions often revolve around the impact of migrations between Aru and Northern Australia, or the impact of capitalism and pearl’s commodification in Aruese society. While the result of Dutch colonial policy had not been discussed with such vigor, the transnational elements within it will undoubtedly brought new things to discover. Using the connection between Netherlands and its British counterpart, a colonial vision of the Aru Islands as a pearling region can be further elaborated.

Method

In aiming to provide a colonial-transnational views towards the Moluccas pearling industry, this article was written using many archival resources. The majority of the primary documents were acquired in Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI), in the Algemeene Secretarie Serie Grote Bundel Besluit 1891-1942. No. 339, 339, 885, 885, 4757. Correspondences between Batavia-Bogor and various British Asian colonial possessions as well as Australia, were used as a novel source in writing marine resource management history of Indonesia. Besides that, the archives highlight how transnational ideas of management can travel within Dutch colonial bureaucratic policy-making.

Colonial Government Perspective Towards Pearling Industry

As stated above, Dutch Colonial government interest with pearling began only in the late 19th century. Australian pearling vessels shocked the colonial state and were seen as the embodiment of an unchecked maritime frontier. Actions during the years 1870-1890s were considered to be an aggressive Australian capitalist expansion towards the Indies. Public moods in Java went sour as Australian ships kept appearing on news items. One opinion in 1883 even heavily criticized Batavia's lack of funding and able-bodied men within its colonial frontiers, leaving it vulnerable to foreign intrusions (*Java-Bode*, 12 January 1883).

In response to such activities, a small survey was conducted in the Aru Islands by the Resident of Amboina from 15 to 20 November 1889. The surveying team, consisted of the Resident and two Posthouder from Dobo and Watuley, travelled with the warship *Arend* to conduct interviews with various Orang Kaya and other heads of villages or Negeri. The interviews were conducted on the western part of Aru or Voorwal and the eastern part or Achterwal. Many of the representatives of each Negeri expressed concern over European mode of exploitation. Particularly a fear over the depletion of pearl oysters and teripang reserves and its impact towards the Aruese economic dependence. With local information showing negative opinion for the pearling industry, Dutch colonial government were increasingly worried on the trans border fishing activity.

Throughout the 1880s, various Achterwal villages also rebelled against colonial authorities, showing an increasing amount of Aruese disappointment. In 1881, the Resident of Amboina, Baron van Höevell was forced to peacefully approach an Achterwal ex-pearl diver, Belbel, in order to stop any potential bloodshed (*Indische Gids*, 1893). The same could not be said when another rebel, Naelaer, was forcefully arrested in 1885-1887 (van Höevell, 1888, 83). Afterwards, a massive Achterwal rebellion in early 1893, became a turning point for Dutch perspective towards the pearling industry. The rebellion, headed by another former pearl diver named Toelfoeloen had gathered an alliance in the

Achterwal (Spyer, 2000, 58-59). Toelfoeloen even led a failed assault to Dobo, the seat of colonial administration, on February 1893 (*Java-Bode* 15 February 1893, 3). Eventually, he and five of his "co-conspirator" were arrested and executed in Ambon in a show of force by the Dutch colonial army. While direct casualties centered around Makassar, Bugis, and Chinese merchant, the entrance of Australians into the pearling trade could potentially brought more complications than relief.

The Resident of Amboina Baron van Höevell, noted in his missive that no Australians thought the international European boundaries were to be applied in this remote corner of the Moluccas. The 3 miles limit border was only adopted by the Netherlands in its Staatsblad 1883 No. 202, after the 6th May 1882 North Sea Fisheries Convention between Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Netherlands, France, and Great Britain. With that in mind, Baron van Höevell also mentioned in his other missive, that an Australian schooner owner, Mr. Raymond O'Kelley refuses to obey the 3 miles limit border, stating that the colonial government does not have sufficient law in creating such demarcation. Regardless of O'Kelley's recklessness, he does point out the absence of colonial instrument to control its maritime frontiers. With such concerning situation, the Parelvisserij Ordonnantie 1893 No. 261 was published in order to response the "unchecked movement" in Aru Islands.

Despite the enactment of Ordinance 1893, Australian vessels continue to work outside the 3 miles limit. A mere small distance from the jurisdiction of colonial warships. During one time in 1894, an Australian schooner *Mavis*, was spotted operating inside the 3 miles limit near Gomo-Gomo village. It was only after colonial warship, *Pontianak* was dispatched, that the Australian left Gomo-Gomo (*Jaarboek van de Koninklijke Nederlandsche Zeemagt*, 1894-1895, 427). In order to further deter any Australian vessel, colonial warships were even reportedly blocked any foreign pearling ship to lay anchor and resupply water, food, or coal in the Achterwal (*The Brisbane Courier*, 7 February 1894).

During that time, local pearl-teripang fishing activity still endure, despite the recent backlash. In

1893, a Makassarese-Chinese, Thoeng Hoe Gie from Makassar, registered to Ambon for a possible pearling concession in the Ceram, Kei, and Aru Island waters. A request that was granted without any specific details a year later in 1894. This request and many others, formed a new possible solution for the Aru Islands. While forbidding any foreign vessels proved to be an expensive and dull task, the Dutch colonial government saw that controlling access by applying permissions, were the solution for both the Aruse and colonial interest. A new colonial pearling ordinance was then needed to be drafted.

The Netherlands Consulates Correspondence with Batavia

With the case of the unfinished state of pearling that Ordinance 1893 left behind, Dutch colonial government began looking other sources for the formulation of a new ordinance. Interestingly, the British colonial government was one of the only colonial powers in the region experienced enough with pearling industry from the mid-19th century. Unlike the VOC's method of pearling which led to an "unpromising results" in the Indies (Boomgaard, 2005, 109), the British had industrialized the pearling in many of its Asian pearling grounds. In searching for these sources, the Dutch colonial government hoped to mapped state rights, taxation policy, and guidelines for pearling licenses. Additionally, this important move also came right after the Department of Colonies addressed the Governor General in 1894. Encouraging the colonial government to settle the pearling condition and to bring colonial treasury agenda into account.

At first, the nearest pearling grounds in the Southeast Asian region is in the British colony of Burma. Despite most of its landscape featuring plains frequently flooded by the Irrawady, the southern coast of Tenasserim, was home to a number of pearling grounds. It seems that Batavia had already requested the Consulate-General in the Straits Settlements to provide a copy of an existing Burma pearling ordinance. But by January 1894, the Consulate had no lead in obtaining such items within their contacts around Singapore. Therefore, the first information regarding the

Tenasserim pearling grounds were obtained by the Netherlands consulate office in Calcutta.

Attached within the consulate's wire to Batavia, was a letter from the Revenue Secretary to Chief Commissioner of Burma in Rangoon, H.H. Mckay. Inside the letter were descriptions of the general condition in the Burmese pearling policy. It also gave a number of pearling locations along the Tenasserim coast, such as the famous Mergui archipelago, and the coast of Tavoy (Dawei), and Amherst (Kyaikkhami). More importantly, the letter stated the British colonial policy only allowed for a maximum of 3 individuals inside a pearling concession term, with each term lasting only for 3 years. Furthermore, he directly referenced a special license published by the Burmese Revenue and Agriculture Department, used in applying to any of the above-mentioned places.

Immediately in March 1894, the Consulate in Calcutta sent the "Burma Fisheries Act of 1875" along with a license to practice pearl-fishing to the Government Secretary. Interestingly, the same task was somehow also continued to be pursued by the Netherlands Consulate-General in Straits Settlements. They immediately contacted the Netherlands Consulate in Rangoon for the Burmese pearling ordinance. The Consulate in Rangoon had assured that the search will be done in a short time. But any further mention of the result of their task were none to be found. Meanwhile, another pearling license was also obtained for the British North Borneo, however it contained the same policy likewise of that in Burma.

Nonetheless, a copy of the Burma Fishery Act of 1875 was obtained by Batavia. Inside the Fisheries Act, the colonial government underlines some important information. Firstly, the British government in Burma appointed a Deputy Commissioner with the rights to declare a fishery open for public, to lease the exclusive rights for fishing, to grant licenses, and to close any fishery if deemed necessary. Secondly, the Pearling License describe a fee to be paid for each license, and for every shells/ton fished from the area, while also prohibits any pearl oyster less than 6 inches to be fished. This clearly described the knowledge for any "state rights" that the Dutch colonial government seek within the pearling industry.

Another source that came into the attention of Batavia came from the Western Australian Government. It was an interesting choice, considering how the Dutch antagonizes much of the Australian pearling activities in the Aru Islands. In spite of that, Australian experience in the pearling industry was more mature than that of the Netherlands Indies. So, the “Western Australia Pearl Shell and Fishery Acts and Regulations” became another important source for the colonial government. While most of the principal policy are still the same, some were more detailed than the Burma Fisheries Act. Firstly, the regulation prohibits any employment of local Aborigines; akin to the Netherlands Indies spirit to excluding the indigenous population. Secondly the regulation brought an “Exclusive License” to collect pearl shells within a defined area. The latter will greatly influence the colonial government in determining the management of pearling areas in the Netherlands Indies.

After all the information had been obtained, the colonial government turned towards the Raad van Nederlandsch-Indie (Council of the Netherlands Indies) for advice and consideration, before any resolution could be signed by the Governor General. This advice, based on the meeting of 5 April 1895, were resolute to fulfilled their objectives; to possibly guard the interest of the indigenous population, to keep out any foreigners, and to promote the interest of colonial treasury. While making the draft ordinance in 1894, the colonial government stressed the power of the Governor General to grant license, opening, and closing of pearling zones. Meanwhile the Director of Internal Affairs (Binnenlandsch Bestuur), suggested that taxation model should follow that of the Western Australia. By charging taxes for pearling license, the boat, diving equipment, and the captains. Other suggestions revolves around the same “spirit” of the colonial government; securing indigenous fishing rights, promoting the interest of the state, and prevent any foreign enterprise to work in Netherlands Indies waters. The draft ordinance was then authorized to be circulated to the public.

Drafting a New Pearling Ordinance, 1894 - 1899

The Draft Pearling Ordinance of 1894 was circulated in many of Netherlands Indies newspaper in 1896. This newly legal piece had been expected by the pearling business community for sometime. As stated in an opinion on *Haagsche Courant*, the new pearling ordinance will clear any confusion regarding the concession requirements and to prevent a monopoly by one company (*Haagsche Courant*, 14 January 1896). As a fruition from previous advices by the Raad van Indie, the concession were given in the form of a parcel, with concession given for only a period of 3 year (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 10 December 1895).

Contained within the draft ordinance are 6 articles that clearly differs than the previous 1893 version. Firstly, the colonial government designated “parcel” water plots in Java, Madura, Lampung District, Bengkulu, Sumatra’s West Coast (Except Troemon), Palembang (Except Jambi), Bangka, Belitung, Western areas of Borneo, Amboina, Minahasa, Celebes and its dependencies, and Lombok. Secondly, the government charged f 50 as fees for license grant, and another f 10 to be paid for every shell/ton. Thirdly, the lease will be set for a minimum of 3 years and a maximum of 10 years. Lastly, the colonial government prohibits any intervention in the local fishing method and obliged all licensee to uphold the indigenous traditional fishing areas (*Java-Bode*, 13 December 1895).

After the the publication of Draft Ordinance 1894, the colonial government also published another supporting legal piece in the form of a royal decree in 1899. Titled as Royal Decree of 8 April 1899 No. 67, it functioned as a basis for penal provision (strafbepalingen) towards any illegal pearling action. As an extension to what has stated in Ordinance 1893, the royal decree of 1899 expanded Dutch colonial authority, such as to inspect cargo of any foreign vessels working within the 3 miles limit, to confiscate any illegal sea products, issuing fines from f 10 up to f 1000, and to arrest the captain of such vessel (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 15 January 1902). The royal decree also cemented colonial authority’s commitment in preserving indigenous fishing rights, by explicitly

stating that such penal laws can only be applied to non indigenous, for example European. This newly detailed draft ordinance facilitates a rush in search of pearl fishing grounds in the late 1890s and early 1900s, as many parts of the Outer Islands opening up new pearling grounds. With the Aru Islands becoming a center for pearling activity.

A New “Pearling Rush”

Following a renewal in the pearling ordinance, the general mood for pearling seems to be moving for the better. Throughout 1895, the colonial government passed as many as 30 to 50 pearling license (*Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, 10 December 1895), while clearly preventing any British-Australian pearling company to pass. Such as the refusal of a license applied by the London-based “The Pearling and Trading Company” (“De Preanger-Bode” 1908). At the same time, Dutch-led companies began registering themselves in the years following 1893. Such as the De Nederlandsch-Indisch Parelvisserij, founded in 1895 in Batavia (“Regerings-Almanak voor Nederlandsch-Indie” 1895).

Some parties involved in the pearling industry begun setting their base of operation in Makassar. In 1896-1897, an Amsterdam-based pearling firm also operated from Makassar, albeit for only a short period. While in 1898, a pearling firm Djoempandang Maatschappij had equipped themselves with 1 schooner and 10 luggers while operating on the Timor Island (*Algemeen Handelsblad*, 22 September 1899). Eventually a local merchant, A & C. Schmid opened their pearling firm in the first decade of the 1900s. A pearling firm that would later join with a Frenchmen, Pierre Claude Jeandel in 1915 and created the Schmid & Jeandel firm (*De Indische Mercur*, 1 October 1915). The pair would become a great player in the Aruese pearling ground. Most of the pearl products were exported to Paris, with a remaining small sum distributed to London, Hamburg, and Amsterdam. For 1896, a total of 150 tonnes pearlshell were carried to Europe. This number increased to 200 ton in the following year (*Haagsche Courant*, 25 November 1899).

During the economic rush, an Arab-Hadrami Lieutenant from Banda by the name Said bin Abdullah Baadilla had become one of the most important figures in local pearling industry. After his ventures in transport vessels between Gresik and Ambon in 1880s, the Gebroeders Baadilla firm entered the pearling business in 1890s (Des Alwi, 2008, 11). By 1894, he had created a multinational network of pearl labour, by using Filipinos or Manilamen (“Zutphensche Courant” 1903), recruited presumably through the American Consulate in Makassar. Many had died during pearling accidents in Larantoea or Neira, and were recorded in Makassar (“Nederlandsche Staatscourant”, 1903). With its “pearling empire” ruling the Aru and Moluccas, Said Baadilla had become a famous celebrity both in the Indies and the Netherlands. In 1896, he gifted Queen Emma with a large pearl and again in 1909 when he presented a large maroon pearl to Queen Wilhelmina, which afterwards knighted Baadilla into the Oranje-Nassau Order (Alwi, 2008, 13).

The success of Baadilla and the growth of Makassar as the main area for Indies pearling had become an economic propaganda for the colonial government. This assurance of commercial security was needed, as many Australians still saw an opportunity to expand their pearling fleets to the Moluccas. This was highlighted in 1898, when H.W.H. Steven from Darwin gave an information to the Netherlands Consulate-General in Melbourne, regarding names of Thursday Island pearling ships that had worked outside the 3 miles limit from Aru. Previously he was already detained for attempting to illegally enter Aruese water, claiming there weren't any new updates on Dutch colonial pearling ordinance in the local Australian gazette. With a potential threat of another “Australian pearling exodus”, the Government Secretary sent a letter to the Netherlands Consulate-General in Melbourne, in order to inform the new draft ordinance 1894 to any Australians looking for pearling concession.

For a moment, as the Australian threats were countered, the colonial government enjoyed itself as the Indies pearling business grew. Turning profits and creating its own pearl-shell markets in Europe, while seemingly ousted the Australians by adopting their own pearling policy. However,

during this short local growth, James Clark and his “Celebes Trading Company” entered the picture in 1904, bringing a new pearling chapter for both the Aru Islands and the Netherlands Indies. Opening up rapid Australian capitalism into to the Indies pearling grounds from New Guinea, to Moluccas, and the Lesser Sunda Islands.

Conclusions

The Aru Islands position as an important source for pearls in the Netherlands Indies wasn't a mere coincidental; it was constructed. Western industrialization that had come to the maritime world also affected the islands placement within the minds of colonial policy makers in Batavia. Needless to say that Australian pearling vessels intrusion, left a remarkable mark in Dutch colonial attitude towards Aru Islands. In a sudden shift, the effort to build up control towards this islands, were put into work within a very small window of time. Using the only known instrument that could bring colonial institution to place, a law was thus put into draft by using a colonial diplomatic networks.

Naturally the use of a diplomatic transnational network was needed to positioned the colonial government within the pearling network. As Britain and Australia was one of the only few colonial powers in Asia-Pacific with a strong pearling capacity, the Dutch can only turned towards them for answers. While Dutch inexperience in the industry might be looked down their British-Australian pearl-shellshers counterparts, the formulation of a new ordinance displayed the quick and decisive step taken by the colonial government. Within a relatively short time, a new pearling rush was pioneered by the vigorous local Indies pearl-shellshers. Transforming the maritime landscape of the Netherlands East Indies into an open field for capitalist ventures.

While at first it might seems that Dutch colonial government were only looking after themselves, but the drafting of a new ordinance was needed by both the Dutch and Australian government. The tumultuous period from the 1880s-1890s dangerously put a strain in the diplomatic relations between The Hague and London and consequently between Batavia and Melbourne (Mullins, 2001, 14-15). Thus, the

drafting secures the need for Dutch colonial government in securing their rights in the Aru, while also leaving the economic door open for any future “law-abiding” Australian enterprise. It was seen a colonial compromise, to quote the words used by Steve Mullins in describing Anglo-Dutch agreement over the pearling situation. This compromise subsequently went to facilitate the entry of James Clark and his newly established “Celebes Trading Company” into “the world of Aru”. Further molding the Netherlands East Indies pearling zones as part of an expanding 19th century exploitative western industry.

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