Review

Guido van Meersbergen: *Ethnography and encounter: The Dutch and English in seventeenth-century South Asia*

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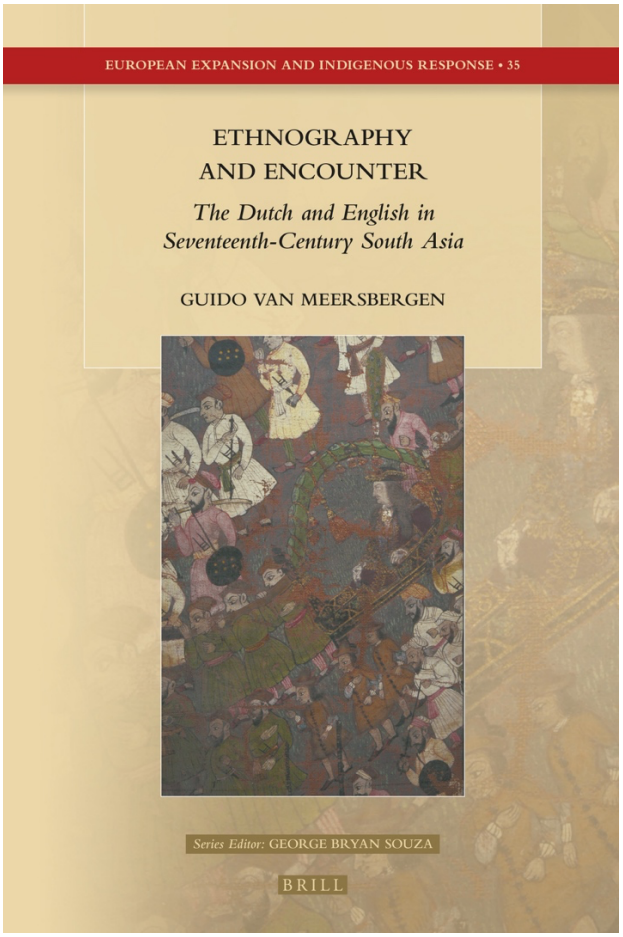

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Ethnography and encounter comes cautiously packaged as a cultural history of cross-cultural interactions driven by Dutch and English expansion in Asia. The author, assistant professor of Early Modern Global History and co-director of the Global History and Culture Centre at the University of Warwick, promises a study of "the making of corporate ethnography and the ways in which Company agents' ideas about and understanding of Asian peoples and societies informed their approaches to cross-cultural contact" (2). The comparative approach to Dutch and English corporate writing – a rarely-taken path – will be of interest to cultural and political historians alike. It sheds light on the vast textual production that took place beyond the cabinets of the better-known travel writers and geographers. The professed objective of the author is, following the historians Stuart Schwartz and Markus Vink, to identify "implicit ethnographies" (10) and make them "explicit" (11). This effort takes up much of the first and second parts of the book, offering a valuable addition to the already vast literature on the pre-history of Saidian Orientalism. It also prepares the ground for a tentative but exciting exploration, in the third and especially the fourth part of how the cultural production of English and Dutch company servants may have fed into political decision-making, ultimately contributing to the growth of European colonialism in Asia.

Chapter 1 lays the foundations by placing Dutch and English authors firmly on common ground. Beyond their shared Renaissance heritage (with an emphasis on Aristotle's *Politics* and classic humouralism), Van Meersbergen highlights the comparable institutional preoccupations of the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) and the *East India Company* (EIC). These organizations cultivated similar anxieties as they strove to grow operations thousands of miles away from their headquarters. Their respective leadership wished to understand, at a distance, the opportunities and the challenges arising in each particular micro-region. Northern Europeans simply did not know enough, despite a whole century of Portuguese activities and textual production, about the power structures and social conventions shaping trade. The Dutch and English leaderships also wished to make sure that their employees behaved in ways that would be acceptable to Asian host societies, but without leading them down the path of assimilation. Anxieties about mingling would soon become a key tenet of European writing about expansion and empire.

Van Meersbergen excels at exploring the cultural assumptions and representations at play in texts while placing them firmly in their institutional contexts. As shown in chapter 2, if the VOC and the EIC "developed a set of institutional writing and archiving practices responsible for generating, disseminating, and solidifying information about Asia" (71), this was done, on the surface at least, to streamline organizational processes and increase predictability.

In fact, many texts produced in the East responded to explicit instructions written in Europe. Despite some important differences, both companies fomented comparable textual productions and archival practices, although these ended up feeding into the wider circulation of texts and ideas in early modern Europe. The author is right to point out that, while the logics of textual production were organizational, neither the VOC nor the EIC became "closed circuits" as texts ended up being moved, copied, printed and used "in pursuit of opportunities" (91).

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the challenges faced by Dutch and English company servants in Asian ports. The focus here is on "affective responses such as anxiety and prejudice" (98), and how stereotypes blossomed precisely as Europeans sought Asian intermediaries that they might trust. Van Meersbergen draws attention to how a series of disputes especially in India in the early 1620s produced a pattern of uneasy "mutual accommodations" (126). Van Meersbergen then illustrates, with abundant recourse to remarkable narrative sources (for example, the diary of Johannes Bacherus, now in the National Archive at The Hague), how northern Europeans learned to represent themselves in the context of diplomatic receptions, especially at the Mughal court. The explorations, in chapters 5 and 6, of how Dutch and English individuals engaged in the complicated system of bestowals of robes of honor (*khil'at*) and the circulation of gifts (from relatively common goods to genuine rarities) are particularly impressive. The research is solid, the prose lively and readable, the combination of European and (some) Asian perspectives productive. The author's willingness to go beyond the famous instance in which Thomas Roe voiced concerns about receiving robes opens windows onto a wide field of different reactions. The rich archival base also promises further revelations in years to come from a historian capable of combining Dutch and English sources in creative ways.

Historians engaged in current debates about early colonialism and racialization will feel inspired to take the arguments in this fine book further. Any study of Dutch and English expansion in Asia remains incomplete, of course, without a grounding in the Iberian experience. Repeatedly, this reviewer was struck by how certain intellectual and political processes described in *Ethnography and encounter* already appear in earlier materials. Secondly, while this book is very much about European stereotyping and othering, the question does arise of what the input of Asian interlocutors may have been. It would be plausible, for instance, to assume that certain local brokers would have worked to denigrate others. While Asian inputs are rarely made explicit in the sources, it may be possible to trace them by reading between the lines (Van Meersbergen himself has recently become involved in work to decolonize traditional readings of European travel literature). Thirdly, the gradual appearance of a racialized vocabulary in 17th and

especially 18th century Dutch and English writings calls for follow-up supported by a robust and fully up-to-date conceptual framework. Dutch and English considerations in Asia about heritability, for example, resonate with the colonization of the wombs of enslaved Black women in the Atlantic, as described recently by Jennifer Morgan (2021) in *Reckoning with slavery: Gender, kinship, and capitalism in the early Black Atlantic*. In fact, the question of "why?" arises in many passages of Van Meersbergen's wonderfully rich study: why, ultimately, did European organizations place such an emphasis on ethnographic writing, if not to create a basis for domination? Is that why no similar corpus emerged on the other side?

Above all else, *Ethnography and encounter* makes for exciting reading because it raises questions about the cultural divergences that undermined European-Asian communications from the onset. Dutch and English men were a tiny minority at the mercy of Mughal functionaries and dignitaries, and they felt awe at what they observed. Yet amongst themselves, they kept fantasizing about using violence against non-Europeans whom they systematically characterized as treacherous, effeminate, despotic, and deserving of being treated brutally. The question thus becomes whether the formula of "fragile equilibrium" (127) does more to clarify the situation than to obscure the fundamental asymmetries developing at the time. Van Meersbergen himself hints at the existence of "asymmetrical sites of exchange" early on in the book (4), and describes "the complex concurrence of intense day-to-day crossings and exchanges with periodic outbursts of hostility" (138). He shows how "the barriers to trust posed by prejudice and unfamiliarity could be overcome, at least partially, through a mixture of institutional provisions, established routines of social communication, long-term relations with the same individual or family-based network, and communal accommodation" – but also how "violence, both physical and rhetorical, remained part of this story" (139). In fact, the violence only kept growing. Chapters 7 and 8 delve into the processes of empire building at Madras (EIC) and in Ceylon (VOC), raising crucial questions about the intellectual and political mechanisms that, here, as in so many other parts of the world, lead from writing to colonization.

Ethnography and encounter is a quietly suggestive, timely book with abundant potential for follow-up. Many readers will find it to contain materials urgently to be revisited, because they speak to some of the most pressing questions of our time. A note of praise is also due for the inclusion of colour illustrations and carefully produced maps. While this is a book by a Dutch historian based in part on Dutch materials, it goes very decidedly beyond the remit of any specialist subfield, raising questions that will be of interest to all historians and

cultural analysts studying global connections and disconnections in the early modern world.

Reference

Morgan. Jennifer. 2021. *Reckoning with slavery: Gender, kinship, and capitalism in the early Black Atlantic*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

About the reviewer

Zoltán Biedermann is professor of Early Modern History at the School of European Languages, Culture and Society at University College London (UK). He studies early global interactions, with a focus on 16th century Portuguese empire building in Asia and a broader interest in European expansion. He has worked comparatively with Dutch, English, and French sources, including travel accounts, geographical works, imperial projects, and maps.