

The Rajas of Papua and East Seram during the Early Modern Period (17TH – 18TH Centuries)

A Bibliographic Essay

**Tom Goodman
University of Hawaii at Manoa
Department of History**

(Last modified August, 2002)

Introduction

In Onin, Kowiai, and the Raja Ampat Islands, three districts in the extreme west and southwest of Papua, live a number of traditional Islamic local leaders (*raja*) with historical and kinship links to rajas in East Seram. These rajas are the last remnants of an old trade network at the crossroads of Southeast Asia and Melanesia. For over 500 years, Seramese sailors ranged over a wide area of Papua, from the westward principalities of the Raja Ampat islands and the southern coasts of the MacCluer Gulf, to the remote and hazardous eastern coves and islets of Kowiai. They brought imported cloth and other finished products from ports in western Indonesia and beyond and exchanged them for valuable Papuan forest products and slaves.

The Seramese traders came from a group of coral reef and volcanic islands off the easternmost tip of Seram Island. Travelling in annual flotillas of trade junks made in the Kei Islands, the Seramese established small fortified trade settlements, called *sosolot*, initially on small coastal islands and later in protected coves. From these tiny footholds, they intermarried with Papuan mainland groups and learned a special trade lingua franca called Bahasa Onin, a mixture of Malay and local languages spoken along the coasts of the Bomberai Peninsula. Family ties and linguistic expertise gave the Seramese *sosolot* communities a decisive advantage over European and indigenous competitors in the lucrative trade in West Papua.

The singular trade relationship between the archipelagoes of southeast Seram and the southwest coast of Papua was known throughout the Indonesian archipelago long before the coming of the Europeans. The fourteenth century Javanese poem, the *Negarakertagama*, made explicit mention of “Wwanin” and “Seran” as important lands under the control of the Majapahit empire (Rouffaer 1908:328). “Wwanin” or Onin was a gloss for the lands bordering the south western portion of the MacCluer Gulf, and “Seran” referred to the east coast of Seram, the southeastern archipelagos, and the southwestern Papuan coasts. Indigenous traders labelled the relationship *sosolot*, a term of an uncertain, possibly Malay, origin which the seventeenth century explorer Johannes Keyts defined as a marked jurisdiction of a “hill or harbour, where a flag was planted and where no other may trade on pain of death.” (van Hille 1905). Nineteenth-century Dutch travel accounts still made explicit mention of the *sosolot* monopolies held by villages or kin groups in archipelagic Southeast Seram (Kolff 1840, Riedel 1886, de Clerq 1891).

The Sosolot Rajas: Historical Sources

The VOC and later Dutch colonial archives remain the best source of information about the history of the *sosolot* rajas. The Koloniaal Archief (Colonial Archives) of the VOC (Dutch East Indies Company) contains most of the material for the seventeenth and eighteenth century history of Maluku and Papua. The “Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren” (Letters and Papers Sent [from Batavia]) are bundled by years and given a VOC number. These papers contain monthly missives from VOC outposts collected by the three eastern provinces of Ambon, Banda, and Ternate. The Koloniaal Archief is especially rich for the 17th and early 18th centuries. The Indonesian national archive in Jakarta contains a rich collection of VOC materials for the latter half of the eighteenth century. The Ambon Province bundles are the second largest collection in the archive.

The colonial reports contain a wide variety of first-hand and second-hand accounts of encounters between the *sosolot* rajas and the VOC officers and native servants who sporadically visited the eastern districts. Especially valuable are the interrogation reports of prisoners captured during the turbulent latter half of the eighteenth century. Many of the East Seramese rajas collaborated with the Tidorese rebel Prince Nuku during his successful rebellion between 1780 and 1805 (Katoppo 1957). Interrogations of suspected slave raiders from the Raja Ampat Islands and repatriated slaves also provide valuable insight into the *sosolot* communities.

Two descriptions of Ambon Province by the VOC trade official and naturalist Georg Rumphius (17th century) and the Protestant missionary Francois Valentijn (18th century) provide the most detailed information on the East Seram rajas (Rumphius 1750, 1983, 1856; Valentijn 1724-6). English and Dutch travel accounts from the nineteenth and early 20th centuries supplement the colonial reports; most notably the writings of the English naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace and the Dutch brig commander D. H. Kolff (Wallace 1862, 1869; Kolff 1840).

The VOC colonial reports are less valuable for the Papuan rajas. By the middle of the 17th century a series of disastrous expeditions to Onin and Kowiai convinced the Company that Papua offered more trouble than profits. For the Papuan raja histories, we must rely on a scattered collection of travel accounts and oral stories. The most readable English account was written by Thomas Forrest during his voyage to Eastern Indonesia between 1774 and 1776 (Forrest 1969). Forrest found Seramese traders deep within Bintuni Bay and heard stories about others across the isthmus in Wandaman Bay. Sollewijn Gelpke, a former Dutch colonial officer in the late 1950s, also provided valuable translations of two expeditions to Onin by Miguel Roxo de Brito in 1581 and Johannes Keyts in 1678 (Sollewijn-Gelpke 1994, 1997). Both de Brito and Keyts noted populous and wealthy communities at the villages of Patipi and Rumbati on the Onin Peninsula. Georg Rumphius also provided second hand descriptions of the West Papua *sosolot* communities based on Johannes Keyt’s lost journal (Rumphius 1856).

Twentieth century missionary accounts and local Dutch *controlleur* reports are the only other written sources for the Papuan rajas. The Protestant missionary, Bout, wrote an unorganized and unsympathetic description of some of the Islamic Fak-Fak and Bintuni Bay rajas (Bout 1920, 1923). Although biased, his account gives us one of the only descriptions of these obscure local leaders and their local competitions. The Dutch collected information on Indonesian traditional laws and customs in the multi-volume “Adatrechtbundels” series. An article by H. Jansen, culled from the November 1949 end-of-tour report submitted by the Fak-Fak controller, Van Milligan, provides a short and rare description and history of the Onin and Kowiai rajas (Jansen 1933; Miedema and Stokhof 1992; Seyne 1919).

Ethnographic Accounts

Until very recently, the former Dutch missionary F. C. Kamma’s work in Biak was the only in-depth study of a maritime Papuan society. (Kamma 1947-49, 1973). The Biak people obtained ritual potency from material objects and titles acquire during long distance voyages to the North Moluccan sultanate of Tidore. Danilyn Rutherford’s more nuanced account of Biak political economy positions long distance trade at the center of Biak notions of identity, power, and cultural difference (Rutherford, 1997).

Recent work in the Bird’s Head Peninsula, west of Biak, and to a lesser extent the Raja Ampat Islands, also touches on maritime themes, though never as a central focus for research. One of the most important maritime regions for the Seramese, the Raja Ampat Islands, is almost completely ignored in Western literature. The late Dutch ethnographer, Alex van der Leeden, was the Western expert on the region until his death in 2001 (van der Leeden 1987, 1993). A devotee of structural anthropology, van der Leeden studied the language and kinship relations of the Maya people of Misool Island. He traveled for several years throughout the Raja Ampat in a large *kora-kora* outrigger boat. One of his Indonesian graduate students, Johsz Mansoben, wrote his masters thesis on Salawati, an important raja polity in Papua (Mansoben 1982).

The late Swedish ethnographer, John-Erik Elmberg, pioneered Bird’s Head research with his controversial functionalist study of the “Kain Timur” cloth complex and the role played by Moluccan influenced “bobat” trade middlemen (Elmberg, 1968). During the last twenty years a number of mostly Dutch scholars have followed Elmberg’s example and produced studies of Bird’s Head highland groups with historical linkages to the *sosolot* trading entrepots in Onin (Miedema 1986; Haenen 1989). Leiden University in the Netherlands organized a multi-disciplinary project dedicated to the study of the Bird’s Head, culminating in a conference held in 1997 and a subsequent compendium of papers (Miedema et al, 1997). Although criticized for ignoring indigenous voices and the ongoing political struggle for Papuan independence, the Leiden-based research project represented the first and only multi-disciplinary attempt to study the western regions of Papua.

Unlike the Bird’s Head Peninsula and Biak, ethnographers and historians have largely overlooked the study of maritime populations in the southwestern regions of West Papua.

The Kowiai region from Arguni Bay eastward has received the most attention. In *De Argoeniërs* by J. Th. van Logchem (van Logchem 1963), we find an interesting, but narrow account of the important trade in damar resin and the effects of slave raiding on the villages of Nagoa, Tonggara, and Tanturi in the upper reaches of Arguni Bay. Jan Pouwer's classic examination of Mimika culture east of Arguni Bay does a better job of contextualizing Mimika within the maritime trade networks of Kowiai. Both works are written in the Dutch language. Leontine Visser's short description of Kamrau Bay is also worth a look (Visser 1988).

The English anthropologist, Roy Ellen, wrote the only contemporary ethnographic account of East Seram polities (Ellen 1993 and 1997). Ellen, who spent several weeks studying rajas on Geser and Goram during two separate field trips in the early 1980s, wrote a short but detailed account of competition among East Seram's 37 rajas. His gives a valuable description of the island communities, their tenuous relationship to a distant Indonesian state, and their varied understandings of raja traditions. Ellen's work sheds less light on the Papuan connection, mostly because the old *sosolot* trade connections are no longer maintained.

Rajas and Indonesian Trade

The *sosolot* rajas grew wealthy and powerful on the profits of Indonesian trade. Since the publication of a seminal essay by J. C. van Leur in 1955 [van Leur 1968], the historians of Southeast Asian trade have studied the role of Asians in the global Indonesian spice trade and the rise of the Dutch East Indies Company. Southeast Asian "peddlers" were for the first time placed alongside the Dutch and Portuguese spice traders as objects of historical inquiry. Van Leur's ground breaking study paved the way for major works on the nature of indigenous trade in pre-colonial and colonial Indonesia. Later historians rejected van Leur's anarchic "small peddler trade" hypothesis in favour of more nuanced and complex renderings of traditional Southeast Asian commerce (e.g. Meilink-Roelofs 1962). Southeast Asian systems of port control, production management, and long-distance trade networks rivalled anything developed by the Europeans at the dawn of the colonial period.

Interest in traditional Moluccan trade patterns is still relatively new. Most historical studies of the Seram Sea examine themes external to cultures of the area: European exploration (Sollewijn Gelpke 1994, 1997) and the Dutch East Indies Company attempts to maintain its spice monopoly (Haga 1884; Leirissa 1994). The few extant ethnographies of Papuan societies only give brief acknowledgements to regional history, glossing the broader geographical, social, and cultural implications of *sosolot* trade. Recent work by the anthropologist Roy Ellen (1979, 1986, 1987, 1993, 1997, in press), the historian Leonard Andaya (1993), and my own work on the *sosolot* trade network in East Seram and Papua (Goodman 1998) are the latest attempts to integrate local themes into a region dominated by Dutch colonial narratives about the spice trade. In his forthcoming book, *On the Edge of the Banda Zone* (Ellen, in press), Roy Ellen identifies three major "zones" of trade in Maluku by the early 17th century Maluku. Each zone focused on the resource-poor administrative centers of Banda, Ambon, and

Tidore/Ternate and a number of local networks in the uncolonized eastern peripheries. Andaya's book, *The World of Maluku*, and some of Ellen's essays explore the transformation of Maluku's pre-colonial subsistence economies based on root crops and sago extraction into colonial plantation economies. The secondary trading systems in what Ellen calls "The Banda Zone" have received the most detailed attention. Ellen examines the ecology of production and political process in archipelagic East Seram to explain the historic transformation of traditional trade into major production centre for the global market. The local trade system centred on Geser-Goram was never fully controlled by Dutch colonialists or the more highly stratified sultanates of North Maluku (Ternate, Tidore, and Bacan). A loose system of Seramese and Bandanese raja polities, operating in what Ellen calls a "plurality of shifting centres," dominated local trade patterns in the Seram Sea. Absent any large trading markets, the Seram Sea polities survived by trading expertise in specialized divisions of labour and political symbols acquired from larger polities like the VOC and the North Moluccan sultanates.

Moluccan-Papuan Archaeological Evidence

Although the evidence is thin and subject to varying interpretations, the contact between Maluku and Papua involved complex shifts of agricultural technologies, pottery use, iron technologies, and human populations. According to current evidence, agriculture, pottery technology, and Austronesian peoples spread eastward between 4500-3000 BP. Metal, glass, and bronze artefacts probably moved eastward along the Sunda island chain before 2000 BP. A similar dispersal of products entered Indonesia from New Guinea. Sugar cane, probably domesticated in New Guinea, moved westward into Indonesia sometime after 5,000 BP. Archaeologists in Sabah, Malaysia found obsidian (3000-2000 BP) which probably came from west New Britain. The Onin region of Papua probably exported bird of paradise plumes, nutmeg, and an aromatic tree bark called massoi during the same period (Spriggs 1998a, Swadling).

Importation of bronze and iron artefacts from the Moluccas probably established the first *sosolot* connections. Kamma and Kooijman (1973) found a number of iron forging sites scattered from the MacCluer Gulf settlements to the Mimika region southeast of Triton Bay. Archaeologists have also found a number of similar bronze Dongson drums in the Bird's Head, Kei Islands, Kur Island, and Goram Island.

Fortified villages or "kotas" near Arguni Island on the Onin Peninsula resembled Moluccan villages according to work done by Cator (1939), Galis (1957, 1964), and Roder (1939-1940). Understudied rock art sites in the Kei Islands, Kaimana, and Arguni may also one day yield important clues about Seram Sea connections.

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