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Mixed Company in the Contact Zone: The “Glocal” Diplomatic Efforts of a Prussian East Indiaman in 1750s Cape Verde

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Abstract:

This article takes a micro-historical actor-centred approach to study the encounter between the officers of a Prussian East India Company Ship and local elites in 1750s Praia, Cape Verde. Combining recent advances in New Diplomatic History and in Company Studies with insights from the study of Contact Zones and transculturation, it analyzes the diplomatic strategies marginalized and hybrid players could adopt to project themselves onto the early modern global stage and locally counterbalance the hegemonic Northern European Atlantic powers. It thus proposes an alternative model of nonprofessional diplomatic interaction in the early modern period.

Keywords: Prussian East India Company – Cape Verde Islands – Diplomacy – Hybridity

Introduction

On November 14, 1752 (a Tuesday) a ship belonging to the recently-established Prussian East India Company sailing from the Prussian port of Emden to Canton in China arrived in the harbor of Praia on Santiago Island, the largest island in the Cape Verde archipelago, then

a Portuguese possession, located a good five-hundred kilometers off the coast of West Africa. It was the first stop the ship made on its journey, and it needed to take up fresh water and provisions. The island itself was regularly used by various European merchant vessels for these purposes, and Praia provided the best harbour of the island. The ship was variously known as *Le Chateau d'Emden*, *Die Burg von Emden*, or *de Borg van Emden*—"Emden's castle" in English. Its journey was meticulously chronicled by one of the assistant supercargoes (or merchants) on board, Jean François Michel.¹ Upon arrival in Praia Michel noted with considerable misgivings that as the ship arrived and fired an impressive eleven-gun salute at the fort, they received no such salute in reply. The only response was the raising of the Portuguese flag. Even worse, five days later, when a convoy of Dutch East India Company (VOC) ships joined the Prussians in the harbor, they, too, did not fire a gun salute at the Prussians, despite having fired a salute for the town. Nor did they reciprocate the gifts the Prussians had sent over to them, or dispatch an officer to pay their respects. Michel was decidedly displeased.

Rather than simply being a thin-skinned newcomer to the East India trade, Michel was actually justified in his reaction. What was at stake here was more than an insult to early modern notions of honor, linked to diplomatic protocol. Diplomatic recognition in this case was a question of survival for the newly-founded Prussian East India Company trading to China.² Twenty years earlier the first ship sent out by the then newly-established Swedish East India Company had been harassed by VOC ships and briefly held in Batavia in 1733.

¹ Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique (BRB): Cabinet des Manuscrits: ms. 18042-43 ("Journal du Voyage a la Chine et courte Description de la Ville D'Emden Par J.F. Michel"). Also transcribed in Henri Cordier, "La Compagnie Prussienne d'Emden au XVIIIe siècle," *T'Oung Pao ou Archives concernant l'histoire, les langues, la géographie et l'ethnographie de l'Asie orientale* 19 (1920): 127-243.

² On the Company see Florian Schui, "Prussia's 'Trans-Oceanic Moment': The Creation of the Prussian Asiatic Trade Company in 1750," *The Historical Journal* 49 (2006): 143-160; Viktor Ring, *Asiatische Handlungskompanien Friedrichs des Grossen* (Berlin, 1890); and Bernd Eberstein, *Preußen und China: Eine Geschichte schwieriger Beziehungen* (Berlin, 2007).

The second ship ran into more serious trouble in the same year when, during its stop in Porto Novo in India, the British and French seized its cargo and imprisoned the crew, on the pretext that the Swedish were not a truly “Swedish” sovereign company since they employed British subjects, which was illegal under British law.³

Twenty years later the new Prussian Company, also seen as an interloper and also employing foreign nationals, was in a similarly precarious position. The company, was based in the recently-acquired Prussian port of Emden, located on what is now the Dutch-German border, which had already hosted the Brandenburg Africa Company in the previous century. Like the earlier Dutch-dominated Africa Company, the China Company was an international affair.⁴ Amongst both its financial backers, its directors, merchants, and sailing personnel, Dutch, English, Scottish, Flemish, and Swedish far outnumbered Prussians or other Germans.⁵ The *Burg von Emden* was the company’s second ever ship to sail to China, and its

³ Christian Koninckx, *The First and Second Charters of the Swedish East India Company (1731-1766)* (Kortrijk, 1980); Paul Hallberg and Koninckx, eds., *A Passage to China: Colin Campbell's Diary of the First Swedish East India Company Expedition to Canton, 1732-33* (Göteborg, 1996); and Conrad Gill, “The Affair of Porto Novo: an Incident in Anglo-Swedish Relations,” *English Historical Review* 286 (1958): 47-65.

⁴ On the Brandenburg Africa Company see the very dated Richard Schück, *Brandenburg-Preussens Kolonial-Politik unter dem Grossen Kurfürsten und seinen Nachfolgern (1647-1721)* (Leipzig, 1889); and more recently Roberto Zaugg, “Grossfriedrichsburg, the First German Colony in Africa? Brandenburg-Prussia, Atlantic Entanglements and National Memory,” in *Shadows of Empire in West Africa. New Perspectives on European Fortifications*, ed. John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu and Victoria Ellen Smith (Basingstoke, 2018), 33-73; Malte Stamm, “Das Koloniale Experiment. Der Sklavenhandel Brandenburg-Preußens im transatlantischen Raum 1680-1718“ (Ph.D. Diss., Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf, 2013); and more broadly Felix Brahm and Eve Rosenhaft, eds., *Slavery Hinterland: Transatlantic Slavery and Continental Europe, 1680–1850* (Woodbridge–Rochester, NY, 2016). On the Company’s relationship with Emden see See Bernd Kappelhoff, *Emden als quasiautonome Stadtrepublik 1611 bis 1749* vol 11 of *Ostfriesland im Schutze des Deiches. Beiträge zur Kultur- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte des ostfriesischen Küstenlandes* (Leer, 1994), 352-56

⁵ Non-Germans outnumbered Germans—not just Prussians, but all Germans—twenty to eight amongst the directors and main shareholders or board-members, and twenty-six to twelve amongst those of the ship’s officers and merchants whose nationality, residency, and sometimes even partial biographies it has been possible to reconstruct on the basis of the surviving documentation from Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin

crew was just as international as its parent organization. The first ship had had to make a stop in England, which had led to a minor diplomatic incident in February that same year, during which several British sailors were taken from board.⁶ The ship was then able to continue its journey, but the incident revealed the dangers the Prussian Company faced. Full diplomatic recognition as an independent chartered company of a sovereign power was crucial to the very survival of the trade, just as it was vital for the vessel to find a friendly port in which to restock their supplies. In an age when the monopoly claims of the major European powers and their trading companies might well lead such a ship to be seized on approaching a port held by one of these powers or companies, the ship had avoided all stopovers until reaching Santiago. Their reception on the island thus become a test case, a politicized “glocal” space, where diplomatic recognition locally provided a touchstone for the global acceptance of the company.⁷ For present on the island were not only the Portuguese: the Prussians were soon joined by several British trading vessels as well as a convoy of Dutch East India Company ships.

Glocal Diplomacy: New Diplomatic History, Transnational Companies, and the Contact Zone

A microhistorical study of this “glocal” encounter therefore offers particularly interesting insights into early modern non-professional diplomatic practice. Recent revisionist advances have moved diplomatic history even more decisively away from the domain of the purely political, of official and professional actors representing sovereign nation states, and have

(GStaPK): I. HA Rep 96 Nr. 423 A-H and I. HA Rep 68 Nr. 434-439; Municipal Archives Emden: II 57, 58, 64; and Johannes-a-Lasco-Bibliothek Emden: Kunst MS 37 and 404.

⁶ GStaPK: I HA GR Rep 68 fols 110-30.

⁷ The notion of the “glocal” was first extensively theorized by Roland Robertson. See Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” in Roland Robertson, Scott Lash and Mike Featherstone, eds., *Global Modernities* (London, 1995), 25-44.

instead anchored it firmly in the cultural history of social praxis. The new focus has been both on non-career diplomatic actors with multiple ties and roles, and on the practice of diplomatic interaction—considering in particular the role of material objects, ceremonial, and hospitality rites.⁸ As investigations into the strategic employment of these conventions have found, their importance increased the more insecure, disputed, and normatively or culturally diverse the situation of the actors involved.⁹ Given the vulnerable position of the multinational Prussian company, it is unsurprising that these also play a central role in the encounter. This microhistorical actor-centred case study thus brings together both New Diplomatic History and the new wave of European overseas trade and East India Companies scholarship, which stresses the multinational makeup of and mobility between the different European East India Companies, as part of a wider re-evaluation of the cross-national makeup of European colonial and economic expansion.¹⁰

However, in this encounter the Prussian Company is not the only player that blurs the lines of national and ethnic identities. The Cape Verde Islands themselves are one of the earliest examples of Atlantic creolization. The Portuguese had claimed and populated this previously uninhabited archipelago in the mid fifteenth century. Used as an entrepôt for the early transatlantic slave trade, the islands maintained close economic and cultural ties to the

⁸ In addition to the literature referred to in the Introduction to the special issue, see Karl W. Schweizer and Matt J. Schumann, “The Revitalization of Diplomatic History: Renewed Reflections,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 19 (2008): 149-86; and Michael J. Hogan, “The Next Big Thing: the Future of Diplomatic History in a Global Age,” *Diplomatic History* 28 (2004): 1-21

⁹ Christian Windler, “From Social Status to Sovereignty—Practices of Foreign Relations from the Renaissance to the *Sattelzeit*,” in Sowerby and Hennings, eds., *Practices of Diplomacy*, 254-65. Conceptually Windler follows Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger, *The Emperor’s Old Clothes: Constitutional History and the Symbolic Language of the Holy Roman Empire*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York, 2015).

¹⁰ See for instance *Beyond Empires: Global, Self-Organizing, Cross-Imperial Networks, 1500-1800*, ed. by Cátia Antunes and Amélia Polónia (Leiden, 2015). On the East India Companies in particular see the special issue *Crossing Companies*, ed. Felicia Gottmann and Philip Stern forthcoming in the *Journal for Global History*.

African mainland. Its population was decidedly mixed. There was a small population considered “white” (*brancos*) in turn divided into even fewer Portuguese-born officials and into those born locally, who the metropolitan Portuguese derisively referred to as *brancos da terra*, and *degredados*, soldiers and civilians exiled for criminal or political reasons. Despite the nomenclature the latter categories could include those of black African and mixed descent, since in the Lusophone world “whiteness” was determined to a great extent by political and economic power and by the ability to exhibit European cultural markers.¹¹ Next to these “whites” there was a larger group of often mixed-race *pardos*, both free and enslaved. The lowest category, *pretos*, was made up of blacks who could be enslaved or freed, converts to Christianity and born on the islands or from numerous societies in western Africa.¹² Both in dress and customs, their cultural practices retained strong Guinean and Senegambian traditions.¹³ By the end of the seventeenth century at the latest, the Cape Verde islands had developed a distinct Creole identity, both culturally and linguistically: together with São Tomé and Príncipe, they were the first such societies in Atlantic history.¹⁴ As such,

¹¹ On the *degredados* see Timothy Coates, *Convicts and Orphans: Forced and State-Sponsored Colonizers in the Portuguese Empire, 1550-1755* (Stanford, 2001).

¹² George E. Brooks, “Cabo Verde: Gulag of the South Atlantic: Racism, Fishing Prohibitions, and Famines,” *History in Africa* 33 (2006): 101-135; idem, *Eurafricans in Western Africa: Commerce, Social Status, Gender, and Religious Observance from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Athens, OH, 2003); and Filipa Ribeiro da Silva, *Dutch and Portuguese in Western Africa: Empires, Merchants and the Atlantic System, 1580-1674* (Leiden, 2011). Tobias Green, “The Emergence of a Mixed Society in Cape Verde in the 17th Century,” in Green, ed., *Brokers of Change: Atlantic Commerce and Culture in Precolonial Western Africa* (Oxford, 2012), 217-236. Green, “Building Creole Identity in the African Atlantic: Boundaries of Race and Religion in 17th Century Cabo Verde,” *History in Africa: an annual journal of method* 36 (2009): 103-125. On race relations in the Portuguese Empire more generally see C R Boxer, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire 1419-1825* (Oxford, 1963); and Francisco Bethencourt and Adrian Pearce, eds., *Racism and Ethnic Relations in the Portuguese-Speaking World* (London/Oxford, 2012).

¹³ See Green and Brooks above. On dress and fashion see Lumumba Hamilcar Shabaka, “Transformation of 'Old' Slavery into Atlantic Slavery: Cape Verde Islands, c. 1500-1879,” (Ph.D. Diss, Michigan State, 2013).

¹⁴ Gerhard Seibert, “Creolization and Creole Communities in the Portuguese Atlantic: São Tomé, Cape Verde, the Rivers of Guinea and Central Africa in Comparison,” in Green, ed.,

these islands were archetypal “contact zones,” in the classic definition by Mary Louise Pratt.¹⁵

The third historiography necessary to make sense of the multifaceted encounter between Cabo Verdeans and the Prussian personnel is thus the wide-ranging and well established scholarship on hybridity, transculturation, and contact zones.¹⁶ Indeed, Pratt’s model figure of the Enlightened, European, urban, and bourgeois travel writer-cum-natural historian, whose “planetary consciousness” “asserted an urban, lettered, male authority over the whole of the planet [and] elaborated a rationalizing, extractive, dissociative understanding which overlaid functional, experiential relations among people, plants, and animals” whilst at the same time depicting the author himself as a hapless and harmless hero of the “anticonquest” perfectly sums up Michel’s self-writing.¹⁷ His journal reveals him to be an enlightened Catholic with an acute interest in natural history and the accumulation of useful knowledge. A surprisingly deft draughtsman and illustrator, Michel chronicles anything from interactions onboard, to marine life, wind and weather conditions, scientific measurements, and the architecture, religious practices, flora, fauna, and economic potential of the places he visits. The stop in Cape Verde is the longest and most detailed section of the journal, taking up 30 of the 88 pages of the shipboard journal proper.¹⁸

“Prussians” and “Portuguese” Cooperate: Two Underdogs Unite

Brokers of Change, 29-51; and Green, “Building Creole Identity,” and Green, “The Emergence of a Mixed Society.”

¹⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London/New York, 1992), 7-8 defines contact zones as “social spaces” in which “peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”

¹⁶ A short and accessible conceptual overview is Peter Burke, *Cultural Hybridity* (Cambridge, 2009).

¹⁷ Pratt, *Imperial eyes*, 29-33 and 37-38.

¹⁸ A lengthy introductory section on the city of Emden does not form part of the numbered pages that make up the shipboard journal proper: BRB: MS 18042-43.

Michel was very intent on promoting the success of this voyage. He travelled as the agent for one of the Company's directors and its biggest investor, the Antwerp merchant François Emmanuel van Ertborn. It is not clear whether Michel had himself invested in the enterprise, but in his journal he identifies very strongly, almost obsessively, with the Company and the fortune of this voyage. This identification becomes an existential and psychological imperative, whose origins are easy to guess. On every journey from Europe to Asia between one tenth and a quarter of men would die.¹⁹ An educated and religious man, Michel would have wanted to ascribe a greater purpose than mere profit to such a perilous journey. In Michel's case this "greater purpose" found its expression in his identification with Prussia as a rising power and in particular with the Prussian company's patron, Frederick the Great, as a model ruler, whom Michel extolled whenever he could.²⁰ For this reason, Michel was determined that the Praia's officials grant their ship all diplomatic honors not only to further boost its international recognition and thereby legitimacy, but also to reinforce the high status that he himself assigned to Prussian enterprise for which he was risking his life. No wonder then that he was concerned at the lack of a gun salute and deeply offended at the VOC ships' lack of courtesy.

Luckily for Michel however, the officials on the island were by no means intent on slighting or rebuffing the Prussians. Unlike the British, Dutch, and French, the Portuguese took no issue with new "interloping" East India Companies like the Prussians, or the Swedish and Ostenders before them. The only reason they had not returned the salute, the Captain of Praia explained to the Prussian crew over dinner, was that they were out of gunpowder. On the contrary, as Michel was soon to realize, the Cabo Verdeans were most eager to welcome

¹⁹ On mortality rates in the different companies, see Philippe Haudrère, *Les Compagnies des Indes orientales. Trois siècles de rencontre entre Orientaux et Occidentaux* (Paris, 2006), 149-50.

²⁰ Cf. the section on Emden and Frederick's improvements to it: BRB: MS 18042.

foreign ships. Whilst on their first settlement the archipelago may indeed have been as green as its name promised, the exploitation by the first settlers had permanently damaged the fragile ecosystem and, combined with regular seasonal droughts and epidemics, the islands were poverty-stricken and subject to frequent devastating famines and mortality crises. Destitution and poverty were widespread; there was practically no coinage in circulation, and inter-island trade was limited. This meant that Cabo Verdeans were dependent on foreign ships, trading vessels in particular, which provided invaluable opportunities for the locals to trade and barter.²¹

Moreover, Praia's officials had just as much of an interest in granting the Prussians full diplomatic honors as the Prussians did. For the local dignitaries who would meet with the Prussian officers and merchants, namely the local governor or Captain of Praia, the local priest or curate, the Colonel stationed there, and the resident Dutch consul who was also a minor revenue officer for the Portuguese crown, there was just as much at stake in this game of "glocal" politics as for the Prussians. They easily accepted the Prussians in their desired role of a global power and received them with all the ceremony due to the envoys of a sovereign state or sovereign trading company.²² By then hosting them as their equals, they similarly arrogated to themselves the role of significant political figures. Just as for the Prussians, this act of "symbolic communication" had a real-life, power-political function.²³

²¹ Brooks, "Cabo Verde: Gulag of the South Atlantic"; and Tobias Green, "Fear and Atlantic History: Some Observations Derived from the History of the Cape Verde Islands and the African Atlantic," *Journal of Atlantic Studies* 3 (2006): 25-42. Whilst there was little coin in circulation, there was still *money*. On the use of cloth as money see Carlos F. Liberato, "Money, Cloth-currency, Monopoly, and Slave Trade in the Rivers of Guiné and the Cape Verde Islands, 1755-1777," in *Money in Africa. British Museum Research Publication* 171, ed. Catherine Eagleton, Harcourt Fuller and John Perkins (London, 2009), 9-19.

²² On early modern trading companies as sovereigns and on the notion of corporate sovereignty more broadly, see the work of Philip Stern, especially *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford, 2011); and "Sovereignty," in *Princeton Companion to Atlantic History*, ed. JC Miller (Princeton, 2012).

²³ On the concept of "symbolische Kommunikation" see Stollberg-Rilinger above.

Demonstrative performances of diplomatic rites reinforced the local elite's social preeminence. At a vast distance from the metropolis that conferred their status, in an uncertain and oftentimes violent local climate, marked by constant fear of uprisings against a weak ruling structure without significant coercive powers, such symbolic reinforcement of social stratification was one of the few means the local leaders had to reinforce their vulnerable position.²⁴ In this case, the local dignitaries found themselves in particularly contested roles: the Dutch consul was refused recognition by the VOC; the curate vainly sought to gain credence for his lineage claims; and there was state of near civil war between the local governor or Captain of Praia and the islands' governor-general in Ribeira Grande, something of which Michel appears to have remained blissfully unaware.²⁵

Both Praia's elite and the Prussian officers and merchants thus occupied a paradoxical position of vulnerability and communicative symbolic power at the same time. The "Portuguese" Cabo Verdeans were both the potential legitimators of the Prussian enterprise and themselves hybrid products of the contested contact zone, just as the "Prussians" arriving as marginalized and insecure players at the same time embodied the legitimizing imperial gaze of the metropolitan European. Both moreover had only very tenuous links to the national power they represented: the "Prussians" were only Prussian in name, while on the officially "Portuguese" side the Colonel, resident on the island for eighteen years, was actually Irish, the consul and revenue official originally Dutch, and both the curate and local governor were likely Cabo-Verdean by birth and had absorbed many local habits and

²⁴ Green, "Fear and Atlantic History"; Brooks, "Cabo Verde: Gulag."

²⁵ The unnamed man Michel confusingly calls "the governor of Praia" undoubtedly was Francisco Álvares de Almada, the *capitão-mor* of Praia whose functions were those of a local governor. The nomenclature adopted in this article is "local governor" to differentiate him both from the governor-general of the archipelago resident in Ribeira Grande (Luís Antónia da Cunha d'Eça) and from the Captain of the Prussian ship (Pieter Dens). On his fractious relationship with the governor-general see Luís de Albuquerque, Ângela Domingues, and António Correia e Silva, *História geral de Cabo Verde*, vol. 3 (Lisbon, 2002), 418. My thanks to Filipa Ribeiro da Silva for her clarifications.

traditions. Diplomatic ritual thus became an important tool of self-legitimization: through demonstrative acts of diplomatic recognition these hybrid and second-rate global and local players were able to mutually reinforce their importance as legitimate representatives of sovereign European states and enterprises.

The locals' determination to give proof of their importance and legitimacy to the "Prussians" is striking. Two even produced metropolitan paperwork as evidence, which they urged their visitors to examine. The local curate by the name of Pedro Gomez, seeking to convince his callers that he was an illegitimate descendant of the Portuguese royal family, found them unimpressed with the letters patent he insisted on showing them. The Dutch consul, who was not being recognized—and hence not paid—by the VOC ships stopping over in Praia, was more prosperous in his appeal to the Prussians. The two supercargoes visiting him were sympathetic and dutifully examined his letters patent from the Estates General, as confirmed by the Portuguese king. As metropolitan arbiters, the Prussians, willing as they were to recognize any friendly local power, were thus eminently useful to the local dignitaries, even if their recognition had no legal standing whatsoever.

The local officials and the Prussian officers and merchants had not only a shared goal in reinforcing the other's legitimacy and position of power. Both also had a common "glocal" opponent. The VOC, in the guise of the recently-arrived convoy, had slighted both of them. Not only had they not fired a gun salute for the Prussians, nor returned their gifts, they had also omitted to immediately send an envoy to Praia's local governor to pay their respects and to ask permission to take up supplies—something the Prussians had made sure to engage in immediately upon their arrival, followed next day by the captain and supercargoes visiting the local governor in person to thank him for his welcome gift of fruit and other refreshments. Given the contested position in which the local governor found himself thanks to his conflict with the governor general, he would have felt the insult keenly. These snubs were

exacerbated by personal animosities, not only by the local governor and the Dutch consul, whose position was contested by the VOC, but also by the Catholic Fleming Michel, who hated all things Dutch with a passion and took every opportunity in his journal to denounce their nefarious influence on the world and Christianity in general, and on the city of Emden and its East India Companies in particular. Religion certainly played a role: like Michel and his principal Van Ertborn, numerous members of the Prussian officer corps, including the captain and his son, hailed from the Catholic Southern Netherlands and they, as well as the local Catholics on the islands, may have felt a certain animosity towards Dutch reformed religion. More importantly for the Prussian Company however, the VOC as one of the, if not *the*, most powerful East India Company had also been instrumental in harassing, impeding, and shutting down previous multinational East India companies, the Ostend and Swedish most notably, which were prior employers of many of the Prussian ship's officers and merchants.²⁶

The VOC was a far more powerful international player than either the Prussian Company or Praia's officials. The Dutch Company's awareness of their own clout undoubtedly explains their lack of urgency to participate in ritual exchange of gifts and courtesies. However, the cooperation of these two marginalized players in the local game of global diplomacy not only allowed them mutually to reinforce their symbolic power, it also provided them with the deeply satisfying opportunity to slight the Dutch in turn. As part of the ongoing symbolic exchanges and performance of hospitality rites, the local governor had invited the senior officers and merchants to a lavish formal dinner, another occasion to display his social status. Real silverware and several sumptuous courses were accompanied

²⁶ Michel Huisman, *La Belgique commerciale sous L'Empereur Charles VI: La Compagnie d'Ostende* (Brussels/Paris, 1902); Jan Parmentier, *De Holle Compagnie. Smokkel en legale handel onder Zuidnederlandse vlag in Bengalen ca 1720-1744* (Hilversum, 1992); Koninckx, *The Swedish East India Company*; Hallberg and Koninckx, eds., *A Passage to China*.

by what Michel immediately recognized as perhaps the most significant part: freshly-cooked white bread, made from white Portuguese flour, a rarity on these islands. A more tangible sign of the governor's metropolitan connections—and by extension of his “whiteness”—could not be had, and to ensure that none of the guests quite missed the bread's significance, it was brought in by a number of servants carrying it “comme en procession.” The religious overtones were clearly understood by Michel and his fellow Catholic officers and merchants, who had just returned from holy mass—even if Michel at least remained oblivious to the message, this was supposed to convey to the local governor's adversary, the governor-general in Ribeira Grande.

Perhaps the greatest success of the dinner was that it provided an occasion for the social humiliation of VOC officers, which compensated for the insults to the local governor and the Prussians and probably also pleased the slighted Dutch consul, another dinner guest. In the middle of dinner, at about four in the afternoon, two officers appeared. They came from the three VOC ships which had arrived early that morning but which had not immediately dispatched officers to inform the governor. The latter, clearly displeased, made the officers sit in a corner with only a glass of wine for nearly an hour, during which he and the Prussians finished their dinner. Only then did he listen to, and grant, the Dutch request to take on fresh water and provisions. A more satisfying rejoinder to the VOC's lack of respect could hardly be imagined, nor can a situation that would drive home more forcefully the alliance of Praia's elite and the Prussians, two players vastly less powerful on the global stage than the Dutch East India Company.

The Problem with Hybridity

All therefore seemed to be going well for the Prussians in their game of glocal diplomacy.

Except that it was not quite: at least not for Michel. He had a very clear, binary, and—to use

an obvious metaphor in this context—black and white vision of how this encounter was to work. For Praia’s officials to be able to confirm the high status that he himself assigned to the Prussian enterprise they had to embody what he considered the highest form of authority: that of the Enlightened, Christian (ideally Catholic), male and white European, who was the polar opposite of the illiterate, savage, black African, whom Michel also expected to meet on the island. In his vision, this binary could not be destabilized: to recognise hybridity or alterity in the local elites, to question their status as “Europeans,” would be to question the legitimacy they could confer on the Prussians, which was of existential importance for Michel. He thus struggled to rewrite a transcultural encounter as a homogenously European one. In spatial terms this meant that the encounter had to be moved from the side-lines occupied by marginal and hybrid actors, that is from the frontier and contact zone, the classic loci of transculturation, to the fictional space of a homogenous metropolis. In terms of spatial consciousness therefore, the encounter takes place in an imaginary Europe, with the exclusion of hybridity on both sides. Despite Michel’s fervent admiration for Frederick the Great, the “Prussians” were, after all, not really Prussian, but largely Flemish, Dutch, Swedish, and British. Nor were they in the majority Roman Catholics, as the bonding of Michel, the captain and some of the other senior staff with the local curate and other Catholic locals might have led them to believe.

Michel was therefore constitutionally unable to conceive of hybridity. He simply refused to acknowledge it, repressing and reinterpreting all evidence to the contrary. However, he was not able to impose such a binary narrative successfully. The imposition of white, male, European homogeneity required a continuous effort on his part that was constantly undermined by evidence of the locals’ alterity, that is of their creolity and hybridity, evident in their customs, diet, dress, and material culture. Indeed, on closer observation their identity as metropolitan Europeans was as fragile as the badly-frayed linen

their Prussian visitors were offered in what was to them a quite unfamiliar handwashing ceremony that opened and closed the governor's dinner. The dinner itself illustrates this. The symbol-laden white bread was undercooked, the dishes a mixture of European and African cuisine, "moitie a l'Africaine, et moitie Portugaise [sic]," ²⁷ and the digestif was the most exotic of all: with the same ceremony previously accorded to the obtrusively European bread, the guests were now presented with a decidedly un-European coconut to drink. Furthermore, the dinner was not presided over by the local governor's wife. Instead, in an encounter he found acutely embarrassing, on his way to relieve himself outdoors, Michel discovered said lady in the courtyard kitchen, dressed like the locals and clearly comfortable in the company of both her daughters and their black servants and slaves, all working together, laughing, joking, and cooking. Indeed, just like the local children, the youngest of the governor's twelve sons and daughters toddled around the house after dinner, coming up to cuddle the guests entirely naked. Letting young children run about naked was a local habit that Michel had already observed both at the curate's and at the Colonel's home and which he found utterly shocking. The customs that Michel chronicled turned out to be creolized, as hybrid and makeshift as the local economy: both "European" and "African" lived in the same kind of house or hut, consisting of one or two rooms, few or no windows and low, palm-covered roofs; their diet was similar, as were their dress, accessories, and religious customs.

Michel's response to evidence that did not meet his preconceived ideas or justificatory needs was a refusal to acknowledge it: he refused to believe that people whom he considers "European" shared the same culture as men and women with darker skin tones even when the evidence was materially manifest in terms of buildings, dress and textiles, or shared physical spaces. He persisted even when he was explicitly and repeatedly told by different local dignitaries that certain customs such as nakedness during childhood were shared practices on

²⁷ "in a half African and half Portuguese fashion." (BRB): MS 18042-43, 47.

the island. Indeed, rather unhelpfully for Michel, many locals were quite amused at his shock: the local governor's wife, cooking, joking and laughing with her daughters and black servants, seemed to find it highly entertaining to see him utterly disconcerted, backing away, bowing, trying to hide his shock at her youngest children's nakedness, at her lack of shoes and stockings, and at what clearly was—though Michel refused to explicitly call it that—her local dress and hairstyle.²⁸

Michel remained undeterred, however. Rather than allow for any evidence of creolization, he wilfully imposed difference, arbitrarily assigning alternative meanings to local customs depending on the skin tone of their performers. Dress and religious accessories are a telling example of this. Fabric and items of clothing, as Michel soon discovered, were popular barter goods, and most inhabitants wore only a few ragged garments.²⁹ Both the governor of Praia and various ethnically African or mixed-race Cabo Verdeans that Michel meets during his stay sported old and worn clothes and both displayed Catholic devotional items on their bodies in an identical fashion, by wearing several medallions, crosses or crucifixes around their necks. Michel, however, refused to view this as the same expression of religious faith. In the case of the white governor such paraphernalia give him a saintly appearance in the chronicler's eyes. His shabby clothes, his cedar cross, medallions and staff turn him in Michel's account into the archetype of a committed Christian: a Pilgrim on the Road to Saintiago de Compostella. On a black skin however, those same symbols were devalued, tokens rather than true signifiers. "Ils se dissent búono Christiano," Michel notes, but he himself, "je les fais passer pour des Catholiques a gros grain."³⁰

²⁸ BRB): MS 18042-43, 23 and 44.

²⁹ The local cottons or *panos* were a fiat money used in the region, particularly for the slave trade. See Liberato, "Money."

³⁰ "They call themselves búono Christiano [but] for my part, I would call them lax Catholics at best." (BRB): MS 18042-43, 37.

To impose segregation and alterity successfully, Michel deliberately silenced non-white and non-male actors: despite encountering several black officials only a single non-white man and no woman is ever given voice in his journal. Whilst not displaying the conscious and systematic intention to segregate according to later notions of biological racism, Michel seems unable to cope with challenges to his pre-existing notions of race, social order, and behavioral and gender norms. Thus on the one occasion where a black man is given a voice he posed a direct threat to Michel's preconceived ideas of Europeanness and otherness, a deeply disturbing moment for the chronicler.

One evening, coming back to the beach to return to the Prussian ship out in the bay, Michel and his companion, another Dutch-speaking supercargo, were met by a group of black or mixed-race locals hawking their goods. One of them addressed Michel in flawless French offering him oranges as a polite gesture of welcome. Michel records being "stunned by such politeness," which he presumably did not expect from a non-European, and was embarrassed not to be able to reciprocate, even more so when told that no such reciprocation was required. The encounter was quite amiable. Michel complimented him on his French, which he presumed must have been acquired during a voyage to Europe, but was told that his interlocutor had simply learnt it on the island. In exchange for the oranges, Michel promised him some tobacco on his next return on land, but he was able to fulfil this promise much sooner, as the other supercargo offered him some of his own tobacco there and then. For Michel this seemingly banal and cordial meeting was nevertheless deeply frightening. The local man's spiel, a not-so-subtle demand for goods to trade or as gifts, was the same that Michel had already encountered from both the curate and the Irish colonel who had made similar overtures or rather demands. With the latter two, Michel had viewed this with some distaste and discomfort, but in a similar situation with non-white protagonists he suddenly feared for his life, accepting the oranges only "fearing some kind of violent catastrophe"

should he persist to refuse and, when subsequent to the exchange he was approached by other sellers in the same manner, in his eyes these morphed into feral creatures “buzzing” around him, “armed to the teeth” and ready to spring to violent action. That these dangerously armed men also wore the same religious tokens that had so impressed him when worn by the local governor made no difference to Michel’s anxiety. Neither did the presence throughout of several—presumably also armed—Prussian sailors waiting to carry him and his companion back to their dinghy.³¹

The hybridity of Creole culture proved deeply unsettling and disturbing for Michel. Those who were supposed to be “European” figures of authority turned out to be unreliable at best, indelicate, mortifying, and verging on the ridiculous at worst. Even with the goodwill of a strict Catholic, Michel could not take seriously the priest’s claims to be descended from Portuguese royalty; he was embarrassed by the governor’s wife, and by the Colonel’s and priest’s barely veiled demands for gifts. The Dutch consul, whom Michel did admire, himself admitted that he was not recognized by the only truly powerful global player present, the Dutch East India Company. Conversely, those who were supposed to be truly alien, i.e. dark-skinned, turned out to speak flawless French and be adept at social manipulation. With black and white children freely mixing in shared domestic spaces, playing naked without any sense of shame, both the alterity of Creole culture and the lack of clear boundaries between “African” and “European” within that culture became manifest time and again. This hybridity destabilized the writer’s dichotomous notions of “European” and “otherness” and proved deeply disconcerting. Hence, despite his obvious satisfaction at the diplomatic success of the visit, his journal reveals frequent undertones of fear and bewilderment.

Michel was a chronicler typical of the natural history travel writers Pratt and Coetzee have studied. His journal also typifies such travel writers’ standard description of black

³¹ (BRB): MS 18042-43, 36.

Africans, insisting both on their physicality and their laziness, turning them into “speechless, denuded, biologized bodies.”³² Another of Michel’s experiences is also typical of Coetzee and Pratt’s accounts of white travellers to South Africa in this period: the white “Europeans” he encounters do not fit into his definition of “Europeanness.” As Pratt and Coetzee have illustrated, the standard response was to introduce a triple hierarchy: at the top, the white metropolitan European visitor and at the bottom the African local, but, thirdly, and distinct from both, the local whites, in the South African case the Boers, who were clearly set apart from, and inferior to, the “proper” Europeans chronicling them. Michel’s struggle arises from the fact that he cannot fit the local elites into the same mold as the South African Boers without jeopardizing his and his expedition’s position. To assign alterity to local elites, to recognize them as Creole would *ipso facto* make it impossible to acknowledge them as fellow Europeans. However, in Michel’s vision it is only fellow Europeans who have the symbolic power to recognize the Prussians as legitimate envoys. The model naturalist travel writer has reached an inevitable impasse when it comes to the glocal diplomacy in the contact zone.

The Pragmatic Merchant-Mariner: an Alternative to the Natural-History Travel Writer

Luckily for the Prussian expedition Jean-François Martin, lost in his ideological preconceptions, had a pragmatic, experienced, and extraordinarily capable counterpart in the ship’s captain, who was at the same time the second supercargo. Pieter Dens was an Austrian Netherlander who had made numerous voyages to the East Indies, first for the Ostend and then for the Swedish East India Company, and had also established himself as a tea trader in

³² Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 52. Cf J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing. On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven, 1988), 13-15. In contrast to the “Europeans” he meets, every non-white local Michel encounters is defined only by his physical attributes: they are “well-built,” “strong,” or “robust,” which implicitly links them to the first, uncivilized, but healthy humans of the state of nature, which in Michel’s mind seem to be much more akin to Hobbes’ *puer robustus* than to Rousseau’s kinder counterpart.

Dunkirk and Ostend.³³ Dens had with him an experienced team of others previously employed by different East India Companies, including his lieutenant, the Fleming Martin Mers who had already served as his second in an earlier voyage to Canton for the Swedish Company.³⁴ Thus Dens was experienced both as a ship commander (the voyage was to be exceptional in not having lost a single man by the time it reached Canton in June 1753) and as a merchant (on its safe return to Emden one year later the ship's cargo proved of good quality and well-assorted), but also with hybridity or multiculturalism. Dens himself moved between the Austrian port of Ostend and the French port of Dunkirk. Having switched “national” East India Companies and countries three times, he had thereby also crossed religious or rather confessional lines, working closely with Swedish and British nationals and expatriates both in his maritime and trading networks. He was able to manage a mixed crew of Lutherans and Catholics, from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds combining Dutch, Swedish, Danish, French, and German.

Dens was also clearly experienced with Cape Verde, its customs, socio-political structure, and economic situation. He appears to have had no difficulties in interacting with the local governor and his black or mixed-race lieutenant, whom he invited for dinner on-board his ship. In all likelihood, this prompted a reciprocation in the guise of the lavish dinner at the governor's home, where, unlike Michel, Dens seems to have been unfazed by the customs. Dens was not stymied by different ethnicities, but neither was he blind to the prevailing hierarchies: he invited both the governor and his lieutenant to an extravagant dinner but did not deign to extend the same courtesy to another black individual who, poorly

³³ BRB: MS 18042-43 fol. 11. On Dens' involvement in the Ostend and Dunkirk tea trade see John Ford Bell Library, Minnesota: Charles Irvine Correspondence: IV Series K: 1742, 1h (Charles Irvine to Pieter Dens March 30, 1743; Irvine to Thomas Wilkinson July 27, 1743) and I series a (Pye & Cruikshank to Irvine, July 5, 1755). On Dens' previous role in the Swedish and Ostend Companies see Koninckx, *The Swedish East India Company*, 306 n.9 and 308.

³⁴ Koninckx, *The Swedish East India Company*, 306 and 308.

dressed and attempting to sell his produce, approached the ship claiming to be the governor of the neighbouring island of Maio.

Michel chronicled events and manipulated evidence. Dens instead manipulated actors and opportunities, without displaying any signs of metropolitan judgement or the need to assimilate Cape Verde to European conventions. Instead he is the perfect example of the adroit non-professional diplomat that recent research in diplomatic history has begun to identify.³⁵ To win over Praia's elites he employed a combination of established protocol and ceremonial (firing a gun salute, sending his respects to the local governor) backed up by the exchange of gifts and the initiation of a series of hospitality rites. These began with Dens sending an envoy to the governor, were followed by gifts in response to the refreshments sent by the governor, then led to the dinner invitation aboard ship and finally culminated in the governor's dinner which permitted Dens to display his own secure position to the for once marginalized VOC officers, demonstrating the Praia—Prussian “glocal” alliance. His clever deployment of gift exchange strategies cemented his position. Having made a present of gunpowder to the local governor and of communion wine to the local priest, Dens and his crew sailed off with the full support of both the temporal and spiritual authorities: with blessings and promises of regular prayers from the curate and accompanied by a full gun salute—all, it should be added, without having been troubled by the VOC convoy.

A Short Window of Opportunity

³⁵ On East India Company servants as diplomats see Romain Bertrand, *Histoire à parts égales, récits d'une rencontre Orient-Occident (XVIe-XVIIe)* (Paris, 2011); Frank Birkenholz, “Merchant-Kings and Lords of the World: Diplomatic Gift-exchange between the Dutch East India Company and the Safavid and Mughal Empires in the Seventeenth Century”; and Guido van Meersbergen, “The Merchant-Diplomat in Comparative Perspective: Embassies to the Court of Aurangzeb, 1660-1666,” both in Sowerby and Hennings, eds., *Practices of Diplomacy*, 147-65 and 219-36.

To conclude, the perennial and cruel question: how does any of this matter? Established diplomatic historians of a more traditional bent have not failed to point to the greatest weakness of the “culturalist turn” in international history: the problem of causation. Cultural encounters such as this one rarely played any role in the macro decisions about war and peace for instance.³⁶ This is true in our case as well, especially given that, when instituting the Emden Company, Frederick II of Prussia had always made clear that, whilst giving it his nominal protection, he would never give it his military one. Nevertheless, soft power, as studied here did have hard power implications: mutual diplomatic recognition could facilitate, on the one side, unmolested journeys and hence cheaper insurance rates and higher profits. On the other side continued legitimation from the metropolis did help to ritually reinforce the contested position of local elites. In the long-term, however, the hard power from the metropole prevailed: whatever good the encounter may have done, the Seven Years’ War put an end to the Prussian Company. In the short term, however, the encounter did matter: the Captain’s adroit handling meant not only was he able to obtain refreshments on the journey and thereby ensure an exceptionally low mortality rate, he also managed to avoid any incident, diplomatic or otherwise with the Dutch, British or other rival companies. In Cape Verde, priest, consul, colonel, and local governor not only had the occasion to demonstrate their status and legitimacy, they received valuable and locally-scarce goods in exchange: wine, tobacco, and, most crucially perhaps, gunpowder.

The real importance of the encounter, however, lies in what it reveals about the diplomatic strategies pursued by marginalized and hybrid players seeking to project themselves onto the global stage. Such “second-rate players” adopted tactics which differed in fascinating ways from those of big players, like the VOC servants studied by Bertrand,

³⁶ David Reynolds, “International History, the Cultural Turn and the Diplomatic Twitch,” *Cultural and Social History* 3 (2006): 75-91.

Birkenholz and van Meersbergen. Whilst Michel's endeavor to rewrite hybridity as dichotomy was ultimately fruitless, the captain's strategies revealed a short historical window in which small, hybrid, and marginalized global actors could interact on terms of mutual respect and equality and in their association provide a counterbalance to the hegemonic Northern European powers. This window falls in-between the turning points identified by the three historiographies that form the backdrop to this study. New Diplomatic History more or less agrees on a cut-off point of the early-modern non-professional and normatively plural practices determined "by the systemic changes of the *Sattelzeit* around 1800," after which professional and often permanently resident representatives of the new sovereign nation states begin to dominate.³⁷ The 1780s also spell the end of the type of small, transnational East India Companies of which the Prussian one formed part. Most of these Companies, from the Ostend to the Swedish, drew their greatest profits from tea imported from Canton and then largely smuggled into Britain.³⁸ The British Commutation Act of 1784, which radically slashed the cost of EIC-imported tea in Britain and thereby deprived tea-smuggling of its *raison-d'être*, marked the beginning of the end for the so-called "interloping companies," whose final demise was then precipitated by the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. At around the same time, Pratt's natural history travellers, whose emergence she traces back to the mid-eighteenth century, had also come to prevail and with them the universalizing logic of the white (northern) European whose vision of racial alterity excluded both hybridity and equality. The Michels of the world had come to dominate over the Pieter Denses. The encounter Dens facilitated on Cape Verde and the non-professional diplomatic strategies he and his local counterparts deployed were thus subject to tight temporal limits. Their

³⁷ Windler in *Practices of Diplomacy*, 256

³⁸ See Hanna Hodacs, *Silk and Tea in the North: Scandinavian Trade and the Market for Asian Goods in Eighteenth-Century Europe* (Basingstoke/New York, 2016); and Louis Dermigny, *La Chine et l'Occident; le commerce à Canton au XVIIIe siècle, 1719-1833*, 4 vols (Paris, 1964), I: 161-93.

precondition was the emergence in the later early modern period of small, transnational, and hybrid overseas trading such as the Ostend ventures. They ceased with the rise of the universalist scientific classificatory project that part-engendered modern racism, with the emergence of the imperial nation state and the concomitant demise of transnational enterprises (“transnational” in the sense of having multinational directors and staff rather than a clearly national basis). Only in this short window was it possible to have an equal exchange between small, marginalized and hybrid actors on the international stage who could nevertheless, when cooperating diplomatically at the local level, throw their weight successfully against a big global player such as the Dutch East India Company.

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