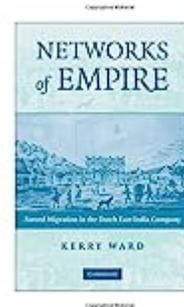




**Kerry Ward.** *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 340 S. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-88586-7.



**Reviewed by** Vincent Houben

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### **K. Ward: Networks of Empire**

This monograph and revised dissertation is an attempt to write the history of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in the format of a network empire, focusing on forced migration between Batavia or Jakarta in current Indonesia and the Cape in South Africa. It assumes that the VOC consisted of a range of different types of land- and sea-based networks, which over time became integrated into an early modern empire encompassing the shores of the Indian Ocean. Forced migration, in the form of legalised slave trade, penal transportation and political banishment, between the imperial nodes of Batavia and Cape town, was part of a larger grid of migration but at the same time an important constitutive element of the VOC empire as a whole and Cape society in particular.

In seven chapters Kerry Ward not only gives a detailed description of mid-eighteenth century convict migration but also uses a bi-focal approach to this phenomenon in order to analyse the inner workings of the VOC administration, legal system, international and social politics. Her key term is that of 'network', which is defined simultaneously as a path of relational power, a

representation of sovereignty and as a structuring mechanism that allows for the unison of macro- and micro-analysis. After an extensive introductory chapter, the book first deals with the VOC structure itself, surveying its legal codes, structures of command, its personnel and system of transferring knowledge. This shows how the VOC developed from a trading enterprise into an empire. Aside from Company servants, this empire was run through a new form of slavery, which differed from existing modes of bondage in the Indian Ocean area. Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned with Batavia and the Cape urban society seen through the lens of crime and punishment. Company servants but mostly indigenous slaves in Batavia were regularly punished by sending them to the Cape, which developed into a penal colony and slave society because of the connection to Southeast Asia, although Mauritius and other sites in the southwestern Indian Ocean also contributed to its development. Chapters 5 and 6 again move from Java to the Cape, in a slightly broader analysis on eighteenth century Dutch policies in Java, the politics of exile that became part of it and their effects on the social fabric of Cape society. Influential Islamic personalities, such as Shaykh Yusuf from Makas-

sar in South Sulawesi, members of the Javanese royalty and hundreds of minor political exiles made colonial society at the Cape increasingly complex, blurring the social boundaries between free and unfree status, ethnicity and religion. After the British took over in 1795, the VOC imperial network at the Cape took at least twenty years to disintegrate.

The historiography of the Dutch East India Company has moved through several stages and the book of Kerry Ward signals the attempt to integrate Company history into the larger history of empire, which in turn is an important part of world history. In the postcolonial era historians first concentrated on the commercial part of early modern trading company history, asking how products were acquired, transported and sold and what this meant for the indigenous trade in the Indian Ocean. Simultaneously, experts of non-European history tried to reconstruct developments in particular localities in which Portuguese, Dutch and British trading companies intervened, thus finding out how, in the course of increasing contact with Europeans, Asian polities in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century were transformed. In connection with an upsurge in urban social history, non-European cities have attracted more attention over the last few decades. Remco Rabenâs unpublished Leiden Ph.D.-thesis of 1996 introduced the format of comparative urban history to the field of VOC study. Several of these strands have now been combined in this innovative study and placed within the overarching analytical structure of new imperial history. By concentrating herself on several legal categories of forced migration, the author claims to have been able to reconstruct how this imperial structure functioned on an overall scale whilst at the same time allowing for a better explanation of how individual VOC settlements developed as colonial societies with partly singular features.

âNetworks of Empireâ is an ambitious book, successfully bringing the history of Java and that of the Cape together into one historical narrative. To do a multi-local, thematically focused study is indeed a fruitful way of looking at the functioning of European trading companies as networks. The network aspect of forced labour migration is stressed over and over again in this study, and regularly recurring terms like âimperial nodeâ, âgridâ, âcircuitâ and âzoneâ underscore this further. Although these terms indicate various aspects of connectivity, they are maybe less helpful to determine the exact nature of the relationship between two or more points within the network. As far as the Batavia-Cape migration is concerned, the question arises whether how one could avoid coining this asymmetrical relationship (in almost every aspect Batavia prescribed how the Cape should act, Batavian politics of exile determined how Cape society evolved) in terms of centre and periphery. That the VOC network was one amongst many is referred to but how exactly this network should be placed into the broader Indian Ocean context remains unclear. On the whole, the author seems to be more familiar with Cape history than with that of Java, since Batavia is certainly not located at the eastern coast of Java (p. 85) and chapter 5 bases itself on a rather eclectic reading on eighteenth century Javanese politics, which has been covered much better elsewhere. Whereas urban societies and imperial structures are the main focus of this study, the reading becomes most interesting when concrete persons and their itineraries within the VOC network come into focus. From a methodological point of view this is a very important study, which needs to be extended by looking at other places as part of what could become an interconnected history of early modern empire in Africa and Asia.

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