

**THE MARDIJKERS OF BATAVIA: CONSTRUCTION OF A COLONIAL
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THE MARDIJKERS OF BATAVIA: CONSTRUCTION OF A COLONIAL IDENTITY (1619-1650)

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Abstract: This paper traces the emergence of the *Mardijkers*. *Mardijkers* were freed slaves living in Dutch Batavia. The slaves were mainly procured from Bengal and Malabar region and were taken to the newly established port city of Batavia. They formed an important part in the early Batavian society. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) utilized the slave labour for establishing the new port city. VOC also converted and gave manumission to these slaves. This paper shows how the practice of conversion and manumission of slaves were intended to create a loyal group who would help in strengthening the VOC hold over Batavia.

*“Na de diepe sporen van het vee, merken wij, dat in het natte moisson week genoeg valt en bekwaam zal wezen te cultiveren, als er maar volk genoeg toe ware, daar wij eenige getrouwe Chinesen en andere vrije Mardijkers of ook wel Nederlanders toe vereischen.”*¹

(After the deep streaks of the cattle, we noticed, that in the wet mousson (monsoon) week enough falls and is good to cultivate, if only there were enough people for it, for which we need loyal Chinese, or else free *Mardijkers* or maybe also Dutchmen are needed.)

Jan van Riebeeck was the administrator of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the founder of Cape Town. As the statement above shows, Jan van Riebeeck thought of two indispensable population groups to be imported from Batavia- the Chinese and the *Mardijkers*. He thought so on the basis of the experiences gained from the already established VOC port town in Batavia. However, what exactly was the reason for choosing these two groups of people for building up a new settlement? The importance of Chinese in Batavia has already produced large numbers of scholarly studies. In this thesis, I focus on the second group, the *Mardijkers*. The amount of works on the *Mardijkers* is shockingly little compared to the vast works already done on the Chinese counterpart. The gap in the historiography is the foremost reason for venturing into this study.

Defining *Mardijkers*

The source of the term *Mardijker* is *merdeka* in Indonesian and Malay. *Merdeka* is an influential Indonesian political slogan mentioning both political and personal liberty.² Its roots go back to a Sanskrit description of a person of pronounced divine authority or prosperity (*maharddika*).³ It seems to have been in use since the seventh century Sri Vijaya kingdom⁴ as a leader of a group of subject population or bondsmen. *Hulun Haji*, personal subjects of the king and the economic base were organized by their own local heads, *murdhaka*. De Casparis interprets *murdhaka* as the head of some group, and its position in the Telegu Batu inscription suggests that the people they controlled were commoners (*hulun*). This

is a certain instance of allocating a reputable Sanskrit title to a formerly prevailing group of native elites who were perhaps best labeled as chiefs.⁵

With the coming of the Portuguese in the Archipelago, the term got a new meaning. Portuguese had first visited the Moluccas in 1512. By 1546 Francis Xavier (1506-1552), a famed Jesuit missionary- the apostle of the Indies- converted many of the natives. Part of this converted natives were originally slaves from India and Tidore. Upon conversion and freedom, these slaves were called *Mardecas*. Thus, in the archipelago the very word *merdeka* now got a Malayo-Portuguese meaning which was very different from its so-called Sanskrit roots, namely, 'freedom from slavery'.⁶ Before the Malayo-Portuguese form, *merdeka* meant 'free-man'. Now, it emphasises the changing status of a man/woman from slave to 'freed'. In Sulawesi and Philippines, this word *merdeka* was used to label the class above the slaves, or people having slaves or bondsmen attached to them. Again, when in the Malay-speaking cities a strong legitimate idea of freemen or non-slave developed during fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, the same word *merdeka* was used. The Malay law codes often mentions wrongdoings concerning freemen (*merdehika*) as well as slaves and from there, laws were also codified to rule freed (*memerdehikakan*) slaves. The Bugis and Makassarese had a comparatively sharp description, permitted by law codes, between slave (*ata*) and free (*merdeka*). They also had an excellently stable political system, with many rival states and sub-states. The word for slave was used for the total defeat of a former vassal state which had protested and again been overpowered. In 1737, when Wajo liberated itself from such a defeat to Bone, the word *merdeka* was used to label the objective of its fight. These Bugis of Wajo developed a saying, "Free (*merdeka*) are the people of Wajo; their only master is custom".⁷

By the early twentieth century this term had developed a solid political meaning, on the one hand to a political freedom as an ambition of the developing nationalist movement, and on the other to individual liberty. The origin of the term suggests that, *merdeka* was used for individual who is free or freed. From the time of nationalist movement, it came to denote freedom in a political and collective sense. From individual freedom, 'merdeka' began to signify political freedom. During Indonesia's struggle for independence, a mutual promise to attain a *merdeka* was one of the most influential bonding powers in the nationalist movement. *Merdeka* suggests, on the one hand, freedom from troublesome control, whether by colonial or neocolonial powers, bureaucratic rules, or power holders in society in general. On the other hand, it infers a personal boldness of not being needlessly humble to social order and social controls. *Merdeka* is remembered as a slogan for national independence, uncompromised by any kind of subservience to previous colonial powers, and is a demand for liberty of political manifestation, liberty to gather and liberty from exploitation. It is also a personal declaration of individual honor.⁸

Supposedly, 'Mardijker' is a Dutch connotation of the word *merdeka* and used by the VOC for freed slaves.⁹ They were freed slaves of non-Indonesian descent and members of the Reformed church. Most of them traced their past back

to the coasts of Indian subcontinent and Portuguese settlements in the sixteenth century. Tracing their origin and their specific naming system Henk Niemeijer writes,

"...Mardijkers, who, though varying ethnic origin, came mainly from India, from the Coromandel Coast and Bengal. The majority of them lived in the eastern suburb of Batavia (Oosterkwartier), while small communities of Mardijkers also lived in the western environs of town. Most of them had been Christianized when they were slaves, and had names like Susana van Bengalen and Williem van de Cust."¹⁰

As heirs of a Mestizo culture, shaped in Portugal's Indian settlements, the Mardijkers characteristically shared rudiments of the European and Asian in their set of clothes; that is to say, they wore Portuguese silk shirts and plumed hat but without shoes. In the eyes of the Dutch it was ridiculous because of its showy attire. Every traveller to Batavia mentioned the unique look of the Mardijkers. The traveller Jacob Haafner was most struck by their uncovered feet, as he said:

"The black Portuguese who are rich parade it excessively, especially in their dress; still, for those not used to such a sight there is no stranger or more contradictory display to be seen than these people in the richest clothing, with ruffles at their wrists, but bare foot, wandering along the street with neither shoes nor stockings."¹¹

Before the Mardijkers

History of the Mardijkers in Batavia is intrinsically linked with the history of Portuguese expansion in Asia. However, the use of slave labor and freed slave labor for empire building was not introduced by the Portuguese in Asia. Islamic world gave ample examples of this practice. Nonetheless, it was the Portuguese from whom the VOC was influenced. VOC was vigorously engaged in slave trade and used slave labor in all port settlements.

VOC engagement in slave-trading was partly influenced by the Portuguese and partly due to the scarcity of labor in various settlements in Asia. From the early seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, slavery played an important part in the Dutch colonial empire. All overseas possessions of the Dutch hinged on in varying degrees on the labor of slaves who were brought in from varied and often distant parts.¹²

During the seventeenth century, tens of thousands of slaves were obtained by the VOC from the Indian subcontinent, first chiefly from the Coromandel Coast and the Bengal-Arakan region, later also from the Malabar Coast and Ceylon.

Table 1. Company slaves exports from Arakan/Bengal region¹³

Year	Number of slaves
1626	380
1636	216
1644	600
1647	1,046
1654	311
1655	1,803
1656	288
1658	153
1659	407
1660	421
1662	101

Table 2. Company slave exports from Coromandel region¹⁴

Year	Number of slaves
1622-1623	1,900
1645-1646	2,118
1659-1661	8,000-10,000
1673-1677	1,839
1694-1696	3,859

Batavia was a slave society that primarily relied on the slaves held by individuals. Europeans, in particular the higher levels of the bureaucracy, were the main slave-owners, along with the Chinese and other ethnicities.¹⁵ Private slaves constituted half of the city's population.¹⁶ They were domestic slaves or were involved in artistries and vending on their owner's account. Others were working as valets, honor guards, and musicians.¹⁷ Company slaves and privately owned slaves co-existed in Batavia, and the extent to which these two systems of labor were steadily separate is indeterminate. Privately owned slaves offered a variety of economic aids to their owners by engaging in a diversity of moneymaking deeds as well as public works. Though the Company kept slaves for this purpose, labor requirements were such that private slaves could frequently be lent out for such work.¹⁸

In this paper, the historical construction of the colonial identity of the *Mardijkers* or the freed slaves is discussed by focusing on the Dutch practice of conversion and manumission of slaves in Batavia.

Conversion and baptism

With the arrival of the Protestant missionaries in Tamil country during the Seventeenth century Catholics were reconverted to Protestantism. The Dutch tried to reconvert the native Catholic escapees who moved away from Santhome to Pulicat. The Dutch Minister baptized forty children in Pulicat during 1615-1616. The Board of the Directors of the VOC in the Netherlands had instructed in 1617 their factors in India to draw up rules for spread of the Calvinist religion. By 1642 the Batavian Code for the East India Company was delivered which specified that no other religion will be exercised other than the Reformed Christian religion as it is educated in the public churches of the Netherlands. Violators of the Code were ordered to be put in chains and banished from the country and get extreme punishment. After the occupation of the Portuguese settlements of Tuticorin and Nagapatnam by the Dutch these guidelines were truly applied.¹⁹

The church and its discipline were in Batavia, as elsewhere, means to discipline and civilize the society. It was a tough job, as in the city of Batavia Christians were in minority. Part of it was also home of Roman Catholic, the Portuguese-speaking slaves and free citizens from India and Malacca as well as many Company servants. The Governor arrested and deported many of them, and at the same time Reformed Church and the papacy fought stubbornly by catechesis and preaching.²⁰

The reasons for conversion of slaves are manifold. First of all, although slavery was the foundation of many of the openings of the ethical order, the church was neither capable nor eager to challenge its existence. The institution of slavery was in contrast with the egalitarian concept of Christianity.²¹ But, it was indispensable for the establishment of the settlement. Thus the Christian benevolent argument was founded on the supposed physical and divine redemption of the individual slave's body and soul if the slave is converted to Christianity.²² Secondly, although the Company had no other options but to use Asian slaves, European generally felt that Asian peoples were unreliable. Particularly in the beginning, it was problematic for them to draw a difference between decent and wicked inhabitants, between faithful and unfaithful subjects. Conversion was a way of convincing themselves that slave system would function more competently because converted slaves would be expected to exercise the ethical standards of Christianity, and the lack of which would be threat to the slave system. Thirdly, it was also a way to limit socialization of slave with other non-Christian Asian slaves which could cause trouble for the Company.

The last reason was quite explicit in the VOC regulations regarding slave trade and slave-ownership among Christians and non-Christians. The ordinances of 4 May 1622 contained of nine articles and were added with instructions for the good control and upbringing of slaves. It commanded that slave trade could only be done for good and adequate causes. Such trades had to be accordingly listed before a magistrate or legal authority by act or deed. No slave could be transported from one place to another without direct agreement of the Governor or magistrate of the originating location, and slaves imported from outside Company area had to be likewise recorded at their point of admission. It was a superseding code that Christians could not sell or transport to people external to Christendom. Nonbeliever in the Company territories could not buy, obtain or hold Christian slaves. On the other hand non-Christians were allowed to sell slaves to Christians, thus founding an irregularity in slave trading provisions. Christians, both new and old- were directed to treat all their slaves with politeness, kindness and sensibleness, to care for them as their own children, and to nurture and teach them in the Christian religion that they might come to obtain holy baptism. Misbelievers were indulged to let their slaves to continue in the religion in which they were raised unless they wanted teaching in the Christian religion. Such slaves could not be deprived of Christian instruction and were they to become Christians, their owner would have to transfer them at a rational amount either to a Christian or to the Company itself.²³

Conversion to Christianity was an attractive choice for the deprived, since it gave them admission to the church's poor relief program. Almost all claimants for charities were women. As early as April 1627 the grievance was perceived that too many women had to be reinforced. Although the Dutch Reformed Church did not openly use the relief program as a means of evangelization, it yet intensely highlighted 'a honest Christian life'. The rising number of poor forced a reform of church held in 1685, as the number of poor became too large to be backed.²⁴

Church was anxious to discipline these newly converted Christians. The aim of religious restraint was to teach the group in the profession of religion and in decent conduct. That is why offenders had to be brought to regret towards themselves as well as god. The second goal was to reconcile the offenders with their sufferers through their public acknowledgment of guilt.²⁵ Consistories in Batavia tried to control sexual and ethical behavior by commanding religious authorizations such as excommunication, and they could be vigorous. Women prevailed among those accused with sexual crimes, while men were more often indicted with drunkenness, fighting, or not going to church.²⁶ Prostitution was also widespread in Batavia, as is common in societies with irregular man-to-woman proportions. On August 13, 1625 a native woman Maria presents herself to the council complaining about her husband, Manuel, who forces her and her female slave to everyday make money by calling in the Dutch and getting a whore's pay from them. In August 1631, it was recognized that numerous Christian women had committed infidelity with Chinese and Islamic Bandanese.²⁷

Four times a year, the Holy Communion was held. Preceding to the Lord's supper, all the parish members were visited at home by the clergymen or councils of the elders and deacons. Complaints among the worshippers were smoothed over where likely, the more severe cases were dealt with when the Church Council met on Thursdays. There and then it was decided who should be rejected admission to the next Lord's supper.²⁸

It was also decided by the church that native women who were not familiar with the testaments should be forbidden from partaking in the communion. It was said that many of them had requested to be baptized with worldly goals in mind, such as in order to marry, or to be freed from slavery. According to this line of thought it was better to retain baptism and communion detached, and permit baptized people only to obtain Holy Communion after they had adequately delivered their serious religious enthusiasm.²⁹ It was decided after much arguing that the old Dutch tradition and the rites should be upheld. No one was to be baptized if he or she were not capable to prove some acquaintance of the catechism.³⁰

VOC made all provisions to be sure that after becoming Christians, these slaves led a life according to the Christian principles and followed the religion properly. Schoolmasters were appointed for them from 1625 onwards. A church document from 1625 discusses elaborately on the duties and responsibilities to be fulfilled by schoolmasters appointed in different quarters, such as Bandanese quarter and Malabarese quarter. For the latter, where converted slaves lived, schoolmasters were ordered to do the following duties:

The schoolmasters had to teach the main ideas (*hoofd-stucken*) of the Christian religion. The teaching could be done in Portuguese, Bengali, Malayalam or in Tamil. The slaves also had to take practice tests to prove that they had learned it properly. Every day, at a certain time in the morning when the bell rang, all females and children were supposed to gather in the ordinary meeting place where they would read a chapter from the Bible in Portuguese, then they would pray and

subsequently would sing a song from Psalmen Davids. The children would be taken special care by the schoolmasters to pray properly. After the prayer was done, the schoolmasters would go to visit the sick people in the quarter. In the evening, the same schedule would be repeated by the schoolmasters for the male slaves.³¹ It can be noted in this context that VOC had trouble finding and holding appropriate men, and in some places *ziekentrooster* or comforter of the sick had to perform as schoolmasters. These people were lower-class men from the Netherlands charged with visiting the sick and holding prayer assemblies.³²

Manumission

This segment reflects on the reasons and consequences of manumission in the initial years of Batavia. It demonstrates that although the ways of manumission varied significantly, in each example the act in fact strengthened the dominant power structure that had depended on the institution of slavery. In some cases, masters free their slaves, while in others the Company might voluntarily grant freedom or might even be bought by a slave. Irrespective of whichever way a slave was manumitted, the outcome was a generous deed planned to bind the freed slave to his or her former master through thankfulness if no longer through direct possession. The making of the *Mardijkers* thus functioned to stimulate faithful subjection among slaves while at the same time hardening the validity of their owners.

Manumission of privately owned slaves

Slaves of private owners could get manumission in two ways, either they could buy their freedom or was given by their masters. Some slaves received a minor monthly or occasional pay as salary or reward in addition to their foods, and a few paid slaves were capable to buy their manumission. Sometimes, slave-owner donated some money to the slaves in their will. A *Mardijker* named Mathijs Reijniersz van de Cust Coromandel gave 10 *realen van achten* to his slave Domingo van Bengala. He also gave 10 *realen van achten* to one of his slave's (Esparance van Bengala) son named Matthijs van Batavia.³³ In another will, which the testator named Niclaes Suijnder van Hoestelt made before repatriation gives example of donating money to slaves. Four of his slaves named Dominga Moga, Anthonij Mogo, Barbara and Catrina- each got 100 *realen van achten*.³⁴ Slaves were freed as acts of piety by their owners, either in the form of the slave's conversion to Christianity or according to the provisions of the owner's last wish.³⁵ Niclaes, in his will also mentioned that after his wife's death, all of his slaves would be freed. Some of the slaves, supposedly old slaves, have been manumitted by their masters in order to relieve themselves of their accountability and upkeep.³⁶

When one looks closely at the occurrence of manumission, one can see the motives for the exercise. Postmortem manumission, that is liberty arranged after the proprietor's demise, was a prevalent procedure of releasing slaves in many cultures. The implied or clear prospect of postmortem manumission was a real way for possessors to safeguard the complete faithfulness and fondness of their slaves. Such postmortem manumission appears to be meant to ensure the continued gratitude and faithfulness of slaves towards the master as long as the

master was alive. Because deceased owner's will was drawn up in advance, slaves tried to render services with utmost subjection, in the hope that they might be considered for postmortem manumission. Such hope and desire in fact made the submission of slaves even more complete. This also allowed the master to have an easy control and reap the benefit of an increased productivity of the slaves. Postmortem manumission invariably came from the prosperous and kind owners. Therefore, it appears that self-interest of the masters conditioned the situation leading to postmortem manumission.³⁷

Manumission of Company owned slaves

For Company owned slaves, causes and consequences of manumission were different. Unlike the free slaves of private owners, the Company slaves had to serve under the Company after their freedom. After serving at least for a few years, they could get a free-burgher status and could settle inside Batavia. There is no evidence furnishing examples of buying freedom by Company slaves, but it is documented that if a slave labor proved to be exceptionally efficient and loyal, he/she could earn freedom. But in every case, granting freedom seemed to be economically more advantageous for the Company.

It seems that the process of Christianization, which is discussed in the previous section, could also open certain ways of manumission. The schoolmasters in the slave quarters had difficulties in communicating with slaves of such wide linguistic background. They were depended on many interpreters and native helpers. Some Malabar and Bengali slaves helped their masters in exchange of small rewards. Later, teachers were chosen from these slaves and they were paid half *realen* and 9 kilograms of rice per month. The family of these teachers also got provisions for living, such as bamboo sticks, clothes for their wives and rice rations for their families. In some cases, these teachers were released. In 1637 there were two Bandanese slave teachers, three Tamil slave teachers, two Bengali slave teachers, and a Mardijkers named Manuel Lopes.³⁸

Manumission of female slaves

Because women slaves formed the backbone of Batavian society, they deserve our special attention. During the VOC period only European males boarded for the East Indies with the work agreements in their hands. The Dutch East India Company did not employ females. Yet some women and orphan girls from the Dutch Republic made their way to the Indies. In the hot and humid climate of the east the majority of the Dutch women soon died.³⁹ The imbalance of men-women ratio in Batavia led an unrestricted intercourse with slave women. Soldiers and sailors heard that their own senior officers picked up slaves for using them as concubines.⁴⁰ In such a situation the ethical restraints learned in home no longer seemed to be effective. In the beginning, the VOC tried to regulate and control the situation. On 11 December 1620, the Company prohibited anyone living within the author of the VOC from keeping a female slave or slaves, concubine or concubines in his house and residence place or elsewhere.⁴¹ It was decided that slave girls should be converted and subsequently freed before being married to a European. The evidence from 1622 informs that slave girls were

occasionally put in a room where Europeans (mainly soldiers) could come and choose a girl. Then, the slave girl would be immediately converted (if not already) and freed.⁴²

After 1630 the directors changed strategies and chose for the Portuguese style of colonization. The VOC itself encouraged mixed marriages in 1633 after abandoning plans to import Dutch women to Batavia, in addition to turning a blind eye to inter-racial unions.⁴³ Portuguese-speaking slave girls from the Coromandel and Malabar Coast of Southern India were in demand.⁴⁴ Many VOC servants were cynical about the formation of a 'New Netherlands' in Asia based on slave labor. Several high level Company officials occasionally supported the immigration of married couples from the Netherlands as the only means of founding a dependable and sustained Dutch community;⁴⁵ it could not be successfully implemented. So, the followers of colonies founded on mixed marriages wanted to safeguard the successor's faithfulness to the Dutch Republic by giving 'European' status to the wife and her descendants. That is why Asian women had to be freed from slavery and converted before their marriages to European men could happen. In the early years of Dutch settlement, transformation from slavery to mistress of a family could be rapid for some Asian women.⁴⁶

This chapter argues that, conversion and manumission was the two pillars to ensure greater loyalty of the freed slaves. By conversion, the Company ensured that the slave could lead an honest and decent life and if a converted slave shows enough loyalty towards the Company and enthusiasm for the religion, he could eventually be freed. Opportunities were given to slaves, but were also restrained by boundaries created by the church and the Company. For women, getting freedom was easier, although it did not ensure a better life. If manumission did not immediately lead to marriage, women in those cases had no means to livelihood and soon were forced to become prostitute. Prostitution was widespread in Batavia, as was common in societies with irregular man-woman ratio in early colonial settlements. Other women went to church for help. Almost all candidates for charities in the Church were women, and many of them were manumitted slaves. As early as April 1627 the grievance was received that too many women had to be reinforced.⁴⁷

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