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# Trafficking Spices, Silver, and Japan: Representations of the Amboina Massacre

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## **Introduction**

The Amboina massacre, with the benefit of hindsight, was a small incident in a small island, but it could produce conflicting and problematic representations and could be a symbol or sign of a global scale trafficking and severing. I intend to make the historical background of this incident clear, with an emphasis on Japan and Japanese soldiers who were involved in this incident, and discuss Dryden's *Amboyna*, Defoe's *Captain Singleton* and Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* in the context of the Amboina incident.

## **I. England, Holland, and Japan**

In 1611, three ships of East Indian Company's fleet departed from England for Asia. The captain of the Hector, one of the ships among them, was Gabriel Towerson, who was to be the principal person brutally murdered at the Amboina incident twelve years later. Towerson was under the command of John Saris, the captain of the Clove, who became the first Englishman in history as an Englishman to make a formal visit to Japan in 1613 with an autographed letter of James I to the Japanese Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu (although before this William Adams had come to Japan on board the Dutch ship *Liefde* in 1600). Given the fact that the English factory in Hirado, which Saris succeeded in establishing in Japan, was short-lived, Robert Markley is right in saying that "Japan itself is a commercial power that regards English efforts to open trade with indifference, bemusement, or contempt" (55).

What I would like to emphasize is that Adams and Saris were a stroke of good fortune for Ieyasu, who for the first time in Japanese history achieved the unification of the whole country. Adams provided Ieyasu with the technique of shipbuilding and knowledge of warfare. Saris introduced eight culverin cannons made in England, with which Ieyasu managed to crush the remaining force of the last Toyotomi family at the grandiose castle of Osaka. As a result, the Edo period, ruled by the Tokugawa Shogunate, lasted for 266 years with its outstanding policy of national isolation.

The Amboina massacre happened in 1623, which was one of the reasons the English factory at Hirado was closed in the same year. The Amboina massacre happened in the Spice Islands, where the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the East India Company (EIC) ferociously competed for dominance, since this island abounded in clove, in pursuit of which Saris's ship was symbolically named "the Clove". Conflicts frequently occurred between 1600 and 1636 in south eastern Asia. During this period, before Tokugawa enforced the closure of the country, Japan was most energetic in trading with Southeast Asian countries. Japanese ships were caught up in fierce struggles with European and Chinese powers which were intensifying in this area. Ieyasu promoted trading with foreign countries before he found the power of the Jesuits politically too dangerous. Japanese emigrants settled in Manilla, Ayutthaya and other cities. Besides, many ronin (masterless samurai) were flowing into the islands and cities in Southeast Asia to be employed as mercenary soldiers.

Among those soldiers were nine Japanese, tortured and executed at the Amboina incident. A Japanese soldier named Heizo employed by the VOC was suspected of spying on the Dutch fortress Victoria. He was arrested and tortured on the charge of complicity with the Englishmen stationed in Amboina at that time. His confession resulted in the execution of nine Japanese, one Portuguese and ten members of the EIC, including George Towerson, who was the head of the English

factory and Saris's comrade. This incident horrified the EIC, which was obliged to withdraw from Southeast Asia. It increased the deep grudge that England held towards its opponent.

It must be stated that around the period of the Amboina massacre, Japan was also in the process of withdrawing from Southeast Asia. One of the reasons for this was that the Dutch government was eliminating Japanese emigrants in Southeastern Asia. And by strengthening the relationship with the Japanese Shogun, the Dutch government isolated the Japanese powers prevalent in Southeast Asia from the motherland Japan. The Dutch thereby could monopolize their profit both in Southeast Asia and in trafficking mainly silver exclusively with Japan. Another reason was that the Tokugawa Shogunate, having consolidated the unification of the country, was then annoyed by the problems which masterless samurai frequently caused outside Japan, and finally professed in 1621, that the Japanese government had nothing to do with what they did in Southeast Asia. In addition, the ban on Christianity forced the expulsion of Portuguese (or Jesuits) from Japan in 1639. This act finally completed the seclusion of the country.

## II. Sexuality and Violence in *Amboyna*

Dryden's *Amboyna* was written and published in 1672, in accordance with the government's behest. The year was just before the third Anglo-Dutch War, and the play was to be performed to promulgate anti-Dutch nationalism. Dryden was a poet laureate, and so he had no choice but to write this propagandistic play. As the editor Vinton A. Dearing says, 'Amboyna was far from the only cause of Anglo-Dutch friction. It was not even the major one' (121). But still the incident was a convenient tool to excite nationalistic antagonism, because this incident had been frequently referred to during the heated discussion between these two countries. The pamphlet *A True Relation of the Unjust, Cruell, and Barbarous Proceedings Against the English at*

*Amboyna* (hereafter *A True Relation*) published in 1624, a year after the Amboina massacre, had been still read, and was a source for Dryden. The drama *Amboyna* starts with the scene where protagonist George Towerson (the namesake of the real head of the English factory in Amboina) landed at the island. A Dutchman (Harman Senior, Governor of Amboyna) who secretly says, 'I have as true a Dutch Antipathy to England, as the proudest He in Amsterdam, that's a bold word now' (13) seems to welcome Towerson with hospitality. To Towerson who desires nothing but fair commerce and friendliness of conversation, the Dutchman says, 'you ask too little friend, we must have more then bare Commerce betwixt us: receive me to your bosom, by this Beard I will never deceive you' (17). The followers of Towerson cast doubt on the Dutchman's sincerity.

The discrepancy between the apparent friendship and latent animosity is a common characteristic seen in the English representation of the Dutchmen. Harman Junior, the son of the Dutch Governor, was once saved his life when he was rescued from the pirates by Tower-son. Despite his indebtedness to Towerson, he treacherously raped his lover Ysabinda, a native woman of the island, and contrived a stratagem whereby the Englishmen were likely to lose their lives. 'Ingratitude' is the key term to characterize the Dutchmen, a theme which is found in some of Defoe's novels.

Ysabinda was raped during the wedding ceremony held for her and her newly wedded husband Towerson. Towerson belatedly noticed this and took revenge on Harman and his followers, but since he softheartedly pardoned some of their lives, the ungrateful Dutchmen betrayed Towerson's trust and captured him. Here Towerson cursed them by saying, 'Oh Monster of Ingratitude' (59).

Whatever the historical facts might be, this drama posits that the rebellious plot of the Englishmen to assault the Victorian Fort of the Dutch was in fact a hoax perpetrated by the Dutchmen with a view to incriminating and executing Towerson. This drama goes on to insist

that the Japanese Samurai were forced to confess the untrue plot of the Englishmen by dint of inhuman and brutal torture by the Dutchmen.

When the Scene five in the Act four is drawn, the half-naked Isabinda who has been raped, is revealed, bound fast to a tree. The Scene in the first scene in the Act five opens, and the audience witnesses the English tortured, and the Dutch tormenting them. These scenes spectacularly symbolize the sexuality and violence surrounding the relationships among the English, the Dutch and Asia. The love between Towerson and Ysabinda represents the English wish of trafficking with Asia, and the rape of Ysabinda by Harman represents also the English wish of severing the Dutch from Asia. The half-naked body of Ysabinda is for the Europeans the object of trafficking.

### III. Colonel Jack in South East Asia

In Defoe's novel *Captain Singleton*, published in 1720, the pirate captain Bob Singleton's greatest ambition was "to range over the Eastern Sea" (155), and his "long projected Design ... lay open to [him], which was, to fall in amongst the *Dutch* Spice Islands, and see what Mischief [he] could do there" (160). One of the desires this fictitious protagonist cherished among the Spice Islands was to ransack the islands and plunder "Nutmegs and Cloves from Banda and Ternate" (160) like the historical John Saris. Captain Singleton had become immensely rich by depriving trading ships of gold, silver, and other valuable goods from all over the world, and the reader wonders why he was so obsessed with Southeast Asia. The narration seems to be based on the premise that every reader explicitly knows the cause of Singleton's persistency, because the narrator says he "suppose[s] any one will guess the Reason" (160) why captain Singleton "had much ado to prevent our Men murdering all the men, as soon as they heard them say, they belonged to Amboyna" (160), when they captured a Dutch ship going to Amboyna.

As there is an explanatory note for this passage in the Pickering & Chatto edition, general readers nowadays find it hard to know the reason for the pirates' uncontrollable anger. Readers who were contemporary with Defoe would have realized the reason immediately. It is more surprising that an event like the Amboyna massacre lingered strongly in the memory of English people as late as 1720—almost a century afterwards.

Since Dryden's *Amboyna*, another half century had passed, at the time of *Captain Singleton*. What we have to be reminded of is that Defoe was a great supporter of William III, originally from the Netherlands. Despite his sympathy for the Dutch, Defoe feels in his poem *The Pacificator* (1700) that "The Cruelties they Exercis'd were such, that Amboyna's nothing, they've out-done the Dutch" (ll.179-180). To emphasize the cruelties for the wit poets such as Dryden, Congreve and Addison, the Amboyna massacre was referred to as a criterion of cruelty. This implies that the outrage felt about the Amboyna massacre never expired, even in Defoe's mind.

The narrator of *Captain Singleton* points out that "the Dutch, who have made themselves Masters of all those Islands, forbid the people dealing with us, or any Strangers whatever, and keep them so in Awe, that they durst not do it"(161). What is described here in *Captain Singleton* fully corresponds to John Saris's situation about a century before, while he was voyaging in the Spice Islands. On February the 26 th, 1612. Captain Saris, wrote, "the Cape marchant of the Flemish factorye at Aanbon [Amboina], bound from thether, came aboard to vizite [him]"(23). On those Dutchmen Saris cast a doubt that "they came but to feare the naturals from bringing cloaues aboard". (24) It appears that the tension between the English and the Dutch remained unchanged for more than a century.

However, the strength of the hatred expressed in the novel is different from the time when the Amboina Massacre happened. In the novel, no retaliatory violence is employed towards the Dutch after all.

Although in the novel the English pirates seized sixteen tons of nutmeg from the Dutch ship, their ship struck upon a rock soon after and they could not but drift among the Spice Islands—which seems to suggest that the devastation they intended to cause proved in vain. Due to this accident, they lost the chance of seizing three Dutch ships going to Amboyna. All they could do was to “trade with the Natives for” “Nutmegs and Mace” “without the Knowledge of their Master the Dutch” (162).

All that Singleton and the pirates seized were three Japanese ships, three Chinese ships and three Spanish ships. They took only one small Dutch ship, but Singleton felt he had “fully perfected [his] first projected Design, of Rummaging among the Spice Islands” (165). Singleton was a well-contented man indeed. Considering all these factors, we can conclude that the revengeful feelings that survived among the English as depicted in this fiction are not so desperate as the EIC members at the time of the massacre.

#### **IV. Imagined Vengeance of the English upon the Dutch in *Oroonoko***

It might sound far-fetched to discuss Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688), in the context of the Amboina Massacre. But at this period, as Avaramudan points out, “the Far East [in this case Amboina] and the Far West [in this case Surinam] continue to overlap in the European imagination” (142). In Surinam, to which Imoinda and Oroonoko were abducted from Africa, arose a feud between the settled Englishmen and the native Indians. The feud led to a massacre of the Indians by the newly arrived Dutchmen. The volatile tension among them was as great as in Amboina, which culminated in the second Anglo-Dutch War (1664-7). “This feud”, the narrator of the work says, “began while I was there, so that I lost half the satisfaction I proposed, in not seeing and visiting the Indian towns” (56). The female narrator also insists that the attitude the Dutch took to the native Indians was barbarous. “[T]he Dutch ... used [Indians] not so civilly as the English, so that



they cut in pieces all they could take, getting into houses and hanging up the mother and all her children about her; and cut a footman, I left behind me, all in joints, and nailed him to trees" (56). The cruelty of the Dutch depicted in *Oroonoko* reminds us of the Dutchmen at Amboina. According to *A True Relation*, in order to make the EIC members confess when treason was suspected, the Dutch called in an EIC man named Edward Collins "and told, that those that were formerly examined, had confest him as accessory to the plot of taking the Castle. Which, when he denied with great oaths & execrations, they made his hands and feet fast to the Rack, bound a cloth about his throat, ready to be put to the torture of water" (8).

At the Amboina Massacre, Japanese soldiers stood between Englishmen and the Dutchmen. In *Oroonoko*, what stands between gentlemanly Englishmen and the cruel deputy governor Byam or the wild Irishman Banister, the characters strongly suggestive of cruel Dutchmen, are Imoinda and Oroonoko. Imoinda represents the body trafficked among the four masters—the old king, the English captain, Trefry and Oroonoko. Imoinda is like a valuable commodity which is exported and changing hands. Her conspicuous trait appears when the narrator says Imoinda is "carved in fine flowers and birds all over her body" and "looks as if it were japanned" (48). This means that Imoinda's whole body is heavily tattooed, which looks like Japanese lacquerware called "makie". The custom of tattooing, as the *OED* indicates, was originally reported to be a Polynesian one. Besides, the definition of the meaning of the verb "japan" in the *OED* is "[t]o lacquer with japan," and the meaning of the noun "japan" is "[a] varnish of exceptional hardness, which originally came from Japan." When this work *Oroonoko* was published, Japanese lacquerware started to be exported to European countries. As Janet Todd writes in her note about "japanned" that Imoinda's body is an "aesthetic [form] appreciated by Europeans, so that her body seems like Japanese lacquerwork" (88), Imoinda's aesthetic body is described as a fervently desired object of

trading. In other words, her japanned body represents the object of trafficking. The fact of the tattooing of Imoinda is revealed when she is sold and transferred to Surinam. The narrator says that the South American continent “reaches from east to west, one way as far as China”(41). In the geographical sense of this novel, Surinam is closer to China or the Orient than to Africa. The oriental trait of tattooing and lacquerware emerges because of this psychological nearness to Orient. In this sense, Imoinda’s “japanned” body is what conjures up the metonymic association with oriental trading, although there is no mention of Japan other than this sentence in the novel.

Imoinda’s body is split between her Oriental trait and her forced residence in America. She represents a severance in this sense and also in that she is finally beheaded. Imoinda’s execution affects Oroonoko, who in some sense performs his end dramatically by self-mutilation, which is another traditional custom of Japanese hara-kiri (or seppuku). Thus, both Imoinda and Oroonoko function in this work as a symbol or sign of trafficking and conflicts.

## Conclusion

I have made an attempt to clarify how the Amboina Massacre had a deep impact on the works of *Amboyna*, *Captain Singleton* and *Oroonoko* in a different way. In *Amboyna*, sexuality and violence among the English, the Dutch and Asia are prominent. In *Captain Singleton*, the Amboina Massacre is directly referred to and the characters are voyaging about the Spice Islands, but no violence is committed to the Dutchmen. This may be due to the fact that this novel is one century after the Amboina Massacre. *Oroonoko*, on the other hand, was published in 1688, more than 30 years before *Captain Singleton*, when the threat of the Netherlands was still imminent. And this is before William of Orange came to England. The Dutch cruelty is described more violently, though there is no straightforward reference to the Amboina massacre in *Oroonoko*. Instead, the metonymic asso-

ciation of Imoinda with oriental trafficking is emphasized.

### Notes

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