



## When the World Came to Banten: Images of Cosmopolitanism and Pluralism in Java in the Writings of Theodore de Bry 1601

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### Abstract

This paper aims to demonstrate that pluralism has always been part and parcel of ordinary human lives in Indonesia, and that it was the norm as far back as the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries when Muslim power was at its height in Java and the rest of the archipelago, long before the advent of European colonial-capitalism and long before the decline of Muslim political-economic power. It hopes to provide a counterfactual argument that shows that cosmopolitanism and pluralism were indeed part of daily political-economic life then, and that Indonesian Muslims were in fact able to live in such a cosmopolitan environment where pluralism was not regarded as a threat or a reason for mass-scale moral panic. The opposite was the case that when Muslim economic-political power was at its height in Java, Javanese Muslims were at their most accommodating and welcoming towards foreigners of diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. In order to highlight such pluralism evidence, our reference will be the work of the writer Johann Theodorus de Bry, whose work *Icones Indiae Orientalis* was published in 1601.

**Keywords:** Pluralism, Cosmopolitanism, Banten, Theodorus de Bry, Seventeenth Century

### A. Banten as a Centre of Pluralism and Cosmopolitanism

The coastal city of Banten sits along the northwestern coastline of Java, close to the Sunda Straits. Long before the creation of the present-day Republic of Indonesia, and before the impending Dutch colonial powers and the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC), it enjoyed the privileged status

of being one of the most important entrepots of Southeast Asia that was connected to the rest of the archipelago and beyond through trade links that extended from China to India, Africa, the Arab lands and Europe. Visitors to Banten today may note that it is a relatively sedated town when compared to other major commercial cities such as Jakarta, Surabaya, Medan or Balikpapan. In contrast to other cities such as Yogyakarta and Surakarta, both of which claim to be the home of Javanese culture, Banten strikes the visitor as a more quiet locality with little to boast about, except for the famous Masjid Agung mosque, which has been listed as a protected national monument.

Banten's Masjid Agung, built during the reign of Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin (1552-1570), provides us with some indication of the power that was once possessed by this kingdom, whose first ruler claimed descent from Sunan Gunung Jati. A closer look at the roof and minaret of the mosque, which are multi-tiered, also suggests a distant connection with Chinese architecture, and it has been noted by scholars that the design of the mosque resembles that of a Chinese pagoda in some respects. The mosque is one of the first indicators of Banten's interesting and complex past pointing out to the history of the kingdom as a cosmopolitan commercial centre where merchants, travelers, priests and mercenaries from across Asia once visited and settled in.

Yet despite the material evidence that is clearly on display for all to see, Indonesia today is experiencing the resurgence of ethno-nationalism and religio-political activism often accompanied by a strong critique against pluralism in general. Over the past two decades, more and more mass movements, NGOs and militant groups have emerged in the country, demanding a re-writing of its constitution that will define the Indonesian republic in distinctively mono-cultural and mono-religious terms. Groups such as the Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front) and hard-line conservative religious leaders like Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Jaafar Umar Tholib-leaders of the Majelis Mujahidin Islam and Laskar Jihad-have repeatedly chastised the Indonesian government for not implementing Islamic law and for not defending the country's Muslim identity. The criticisms of such groups and individuals are not simply directed towards the Indonesian government and the political elite, but strike at the heart of Indonesia's constitution and the nation's nationalist credo that is embodied in the principles of Pancasila, as well as the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*-Unity in Diversity.

The critique against pluralism and diversity-that was most recently articulated by former radical leader Jaafar Umar Tholib in the city of

Yogyakarta in June 2014-has now assumed a religio-political tone when hardliners present it as an affront to Islam. In so doing, Tholib had gone as far as declaring his own ‘Jihad against Pluralism’ at the rally he led in Yogyakarta. At the core of the critique are the inter-related notions that pluralism is a new phenomenon and that it is an alien phenomenon that goes against the tide of Indonesian-Muslim history and identity. Explaining how and why pluralism has come to assume a negative value and meaning in present-day Indonesia is not, however, the subject of this paper. What this paper intends to do is to demonstrate that pluralism has always been part and parcel of ordinary human lives in Indonesia, and that it was the norm as far back as the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries when Muslim power was at its height in Java and the rest of the archipelago, long before the advent of European colonial-capitalism and long before the decline of Muslim political-economic power. It hopes to provide a counterfactual argument that shows that cosmopolitanism and pluralism were indeed part of daily political-economic life then, and that Indonesian Muslims were in fact able to live in such a cosmopolitan environment where pluralism was not regarded as a threat or a reason for mass-scale moral panic long before the concept of the ‘Indonesian republic’ was even conceived. The opposite was the case that when Muslim economic-political power was at its height in Java, Javanese Muslims were at their most accommodating and welcoming towards foreigners of diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds. In order to do highlight such pluralism evidence, our reference will be the work of the writer Johann Theodorus de Bry, whose work *Icones Indiae Orientalis* was published in 1601.

## **B. Banten Cosmopolitan: Images of Banten and the rest of Java in de Bry’s *Icones Indiae Orientalis***

The images that we intend to discuss come from the work by Theodorus, Johann Theodore, and Johann Israel de Bry, whose full title is *Icones Sive Expressae Et Artificiose Delineationes Quarundam Mapparum, Locorum Maritimorum, Insularum, Urbium, & Popularum: Quibus & Horundem Vitae, Naturae, Morum, Habituumque Descriptio Adiunctaest: Veluti Haec Omnia, In India Navigatione Versus Orientem Sucepta, diligenter Obseruata, Adeoque Tribus Hisce Indiae Orientalis Descriptaelibrisinsertafunt* (Johann Theodore de Bry and Johann Israel de Bry, Frankfurt, 1601) The book is from the Farish A. Noor collection, and is divided into two volumes, the first comprises of copperplate images and the second is a written account of

voyages undertaken to Java and to Banten in particular. We begin with an account of the author himself, Theodorus de Bry (1528-1598).



Figure1 De Bry – Front page with the year of 1601

Theodorus de Bry's works were of a collaborative nature; for, the writer-engraver worked together with his two sons Johann Theodore (1560-1623) and Johann Israel (1565-1609). Midway through his career he was influenced by the work of Richard Hakluyt, whose accounts of voyages beyond Europe had caused a stir in London and the rest of Europe. Together with his son, Johann Theodore de Bry, he produced some of the most popular accounts of voyages to the Americas as well as the East Indies, but the de Bry family were most known for the quality of their engravings that gave Europeans a vivid impression of life beyond the shores of Europe. The *Icones Indiae Orientalis* was put together by his sons Johann Theodore and Johann Israel, and though Theodorus had no hand in the final version that was published in 1601, the work was attributed to him as well for it was a collaborative venture between the father and his two sons.<sup>2</sup>

De Bry lived and worked at a time when Europe's knowledge of the world beyond its borders was being challenged as a result of the maritime explorations that were being undertaken by Portuguese, Spanish, and later

English, French and Dutch explorers. It has to be remembered that up to the fifteenth century, European accounts of the world were drawn largely from both classical (Hellenic, Ptolemaic, Arabic) sources as well as religious texts. Geography, as a discipline, was at its infancy then in Europe, when compared to the knowledge of the world that was already developed among Arab, Indian, Chinese and other Asian mariners and cartographers. For centuries Europe's first point of contact with the outside world was the Arab civilization that was its closest and oldest civilizational neighbor, but the legacy of the crusades against the Arabs in the holy lands meant that European perceptions of the world beyond were largely framed in competitive, even antagonistic, terms.

The centrality of Europe, which was an idea developed from an inward-looking and exclusive interpretation of scripture, was eventually challenged by the discoveries being made in navigation and astronomy. As Europeans began to venture beyond the Mediterranean in order to break free of the Arabs' control of the silk route to the East, the first generation of European navigators and explorers made contact with the new world: America. Grafton (1992) notes that for the first generation of geographers and cartographers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the discovery of a world beyond the narrow confines of Christian Europe was a traumatic one for it challenged the Bible's account of creation and the spread of humankind across the world. He writes of de Bry thus:

*"Theodore de Bry, a Protestant refugee from Liege who settled in Strasbourg, began publishing his America, a multi-volume compilation of previously published new world accounts, in 1590. After his death in 1598 his sons published volumes seven through twelve, and Matthieu Merian, his son-in-law, published the thirteenth and final volume in 1634. [...] When de Bry looked at the new world, he projected unto it his theology and his politics. The engravings of Adam and Eve in the first volume and of Noah and the ark in the second are integral to his vision of the new world whose peoples, however admirable, were irredeemably lost because they lived outside Christianity. Given de Bry's point of view, it is no surprise that idolatry and cannibalism figure so prominently in his title pages."*<sup>3</sup>

De Bry himself was hardly a liberal by any standards, though living and working as he did at a time when the European worldview was hardly challenged by any solid counterfactuals and when knowledge – as defined by the authorities that controlled the few universities in Europe – was necessarily shaped and valued according to the criteria set by religious standards, it is understandable that he could not imagine that other societies and nations could possess the same standards of civilization as his

own. The contrast between the civilized and uncivilized was evident in his writings on the new world, where images of native Americans were invariably accompanied by subtle and not-so-subtle references to their 'barbarism' and 'cruelty'. In de Bry's account of America, the latter is framed and visually depicted as the exact opposite of everything that Europe was: If Europe was seen as civilized, cultured, ordered and peaceful, then the new world was deliberately configured as an uncivilized land that was overrun by barbaric natives who lived disordered and violent lives. The theme of cannibalism was most prevalent in the copperplate engravings found in Theodorus and Johann Theodore de Bry's work on America, and they emphasize the inhuman character of the native Americans whom they regarded as un-Godly heathens and idolaters.

After the death of Theodorus in 1598, his writings and engravings of India and the East Indies were compiled and published in the form of the *Icones Indiae Orientalis* that was put together by Johann Theodore and Johann Israel. Published in 1601, the publication was one of the first works on India and the East Indies available in Europe at the time, and it contains some of the earliest copperplate images of life in the East. For the reader who is familiar with the images of native Americans in his earlier work on the new world, de Bry's images of daily life in the East Indies could not be more striking in contrast.

De Bry's censorious tone that was read off the pages of his work on America is nowhere to be found in the *Icones Indiae Orientalis*. For here de Bry was forced to concede that the world of the East Indies was one where Asian communities had developed their own system of commerce, governance, religious praxis and culture to a level that rivaled Europe's. In the copy that we intend to look at, there are 29 illustrations that remain – out of a total of 31. Thirteen of the plates (plates I-XIII) features images and maps of India and Madagascar. Plate XIV (*Habitus Moresque Insulae Svmatra Incolarvm*) looks at Sumatra, and is accompanied by a short description of the dress and manners of the Muslim ruler of Sumatra.<sup>4</sup> The description of Banten (and other parts of Java) commences from plate XV to XXXI.<sup>5</sup>

The section on Banten begins with plate XV: *Qvae Ratio Conditiove Portvum Et Navivum Stationisadciuitatem Bantam*, which features a map that is detailed and points out the shoals and rocks that block the entry to the port-city then. From the outset, de Bry identifies Banten as a Muslim polity and this is clear in the two subsequent plates, plate XVIII: *Solemnitas Nvptialis Bantam* and plate XIX: *Qvo Ritv Habituve Duces Sev Capitanei Per Viampubliceincendant*, which feature images of a local wedding as well as a detailed depiction of the ruler of Banten. The ruler is shown walking

beneath a parasol and he wears a turban on his head – a common motif at the time that signified the Muslim faith of the subject in question. Both the ruler and the nobles and men-at-arms who accompany him are seen wearing sarongs although the ruler is bare-chested. We could see one of the first images of the *keris* (some sort of small daggers), such as the one that is tucked into the sarong of the Sultan himself.

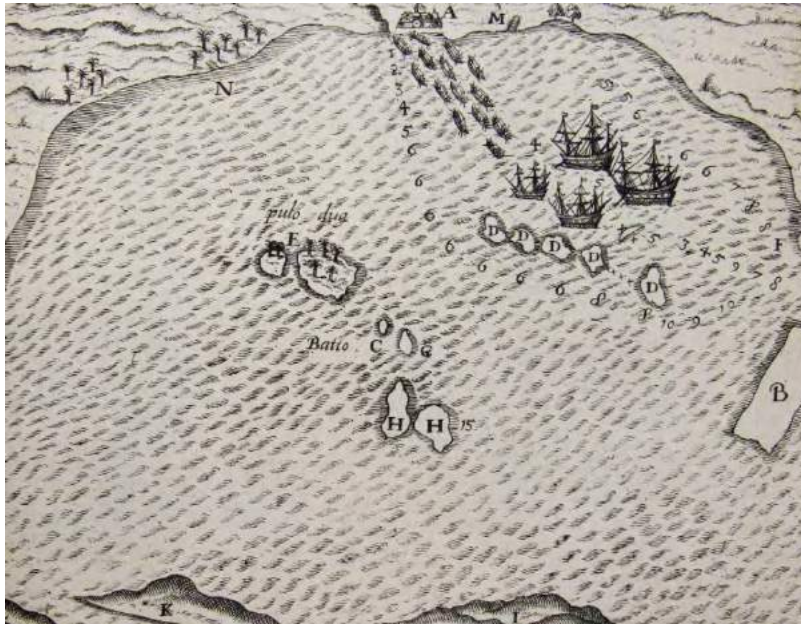


Figure 2 Plate XV *Quae Ratio Conditioe Portvum Et Navivum Stationis ad ciuitatem Bantam*



Figure 3 Plate XVIII *Solemnitas Nuptialis Bantam*



Figure 4 Plate XIX *Qvo Ritw Habitve Dvces Sev Capitatei Per Viampublice incedant*



The developed political system in Banten is depicted in some of the plates that follow, notably plate XX: *Milites In Bantam*, plate XXV: *Qvo Ritv Bantani Concilia Militaria Agant* and plate XXVI: *Rusticorvm, Qvi Pridemiuxta Civitatem Bantam*. The first offers a description of the armed forces of Banten, and a brief description of the soldiery there. The second offers a glimpse of a political council, where the Sultan presides over his court. The meeting is held outdoors, with the ruler, his court, nobles, generals and admirals all sitting on the ground as they discuss matters of military and strategic concern. Interestingly, the text that accompanies the illustration notes that also present at this political assembly were Malays (from the Malay Peninsula), Arabs and Turks (*Malayos, Turca, Arabes*). The fact that Malays, Turks and Arabs were present at the political council suggests that Bantenese society was one where foreigners were allowed to take part in matters of governance, and that affairs of state were handled via consultation with all the communities that were residing in Banten then.



Figure 5 Plate XX *Milites In Bantam*



Figure 6 Plate XXV *Qvo Ritv Bantani Concilia Militaria Agant*



Figure 7 Plate XXVI *Rusticorum, Qvi Pridemivxta Civitatem Bantam*

This theme is further developed in the plates that depict the various communities that were present in Banten, such as plate XXI: *Extraneorum Mercatorum In Bantam*, plate XXII: *Mercatorum Extraneorum In Bantam*, plate XXIII: *Mercatorum Ex China In Bantam*, and plate XXIV: *Chinensium In Bantam Superstitio Et Idolatria*. De Bry's plates present us with a visual depiction of the different communities that resided in Banten then, and notes that apart from the Bantenese there were also Malays, Burmese, Persians, Arabs, Turks and Chinese living in the cosmopolitan port-city. Most of these communities had come to trade, and in the images found in de Bry's text we get the impression that they had settled very well. In the account of Chinese merchants for instance, the author notes that life for the Chinese community in Banten was freer than elsewhere, and that Chinese women were able to engage in commerce in the public domain. The extent to which these communities had been able to integrate and settle in Banten is emphasized further in plate XXIV, which features the image of Chinese inhabitants praying at a local Chinese temple, engaged in what de Bry described as 'superstition and idolatry' (*Superstitio Et Idolatria*).



Figure 8 Plate XXI: *Extraneorum Mercatorum In Bantam*



Figure 9 Plate XXII *Mercantorum Extraneorum In Bantam*



Figure 10 Plate XXIII: *Mercantorum Ex China In Bantam*



Figure 11 Plate XXIV: *Chinensium In Bantam Superstitio Et Idolatria*

Though plate XXIV is in keeping with the Eurocentric and Christian-centric bias of de Bry, who regarded the natives of America as heathen idolaters and cannibals, it is important to note that the images we find in the *Icones Indiae Orientalis* are of a decidedly less judgmental nature. Compared to the depiction of the Native Americans who were often depicted carrying out wanton acts of cruelty and cannibalism, de Bry was unable to launch into a tirade of prejudiced judgments in the case of Banten. Nor was de Bry able to describe the Bantenese as a backward or primitive people, for it was clear that Banten was by then a widely known and well-connected commercial centre that had managed to attract merchants and voyagers from across Asia and beyond. Plates XXVII: *Triremes Sev Galiottae Et Fustae Iavnenfium* and XXVIII: *Navium, Quibus Bantani Utuntur, Genera quatuor* feature images of ships and vessels of all kinds that were then found in the port of Banten, and serve as a testimonial to how extensive Banten's international commercial links were by then.

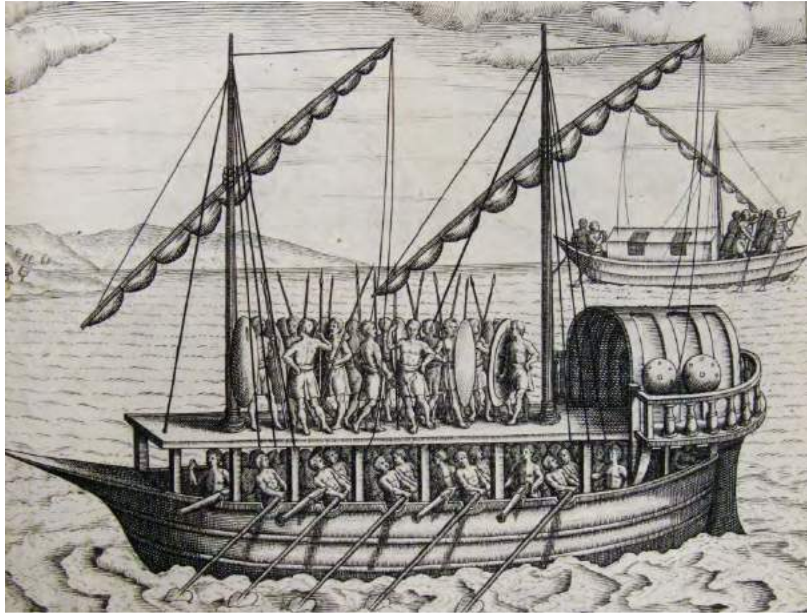


Figure 12 Plate XXVII *Triremes Sev Galiottae Et Fvstae Iavenensium*



Figure 13 Plate XXVIII: *Navium, Quibus Bantani Utuntur, Genera quatuor*

Apart from commerce and administration, de Bry also takes note of Banten's sophisticated local culture and the text is accompanied by plates that allude to the highly developed arts, dance and music that was to be found in Banten then. Plate XXIX: *Chorea Sev Tripvdivm Iavanorum* and plate XXX: *Charagma Pelvium Sive Cymbalorum, Quibus Iavani Campanarum, Muficorum instrumentorum aliorum loco vtuntur* feature illustrations of Javanese dance and musical performances, and de Bry's image of the gamelan in plate XXX may be the very first depiction of the gamelan in Western literature.



Figure 14 Plate XXIX: *Chorea Sev Tripvdivm Iavanorum*

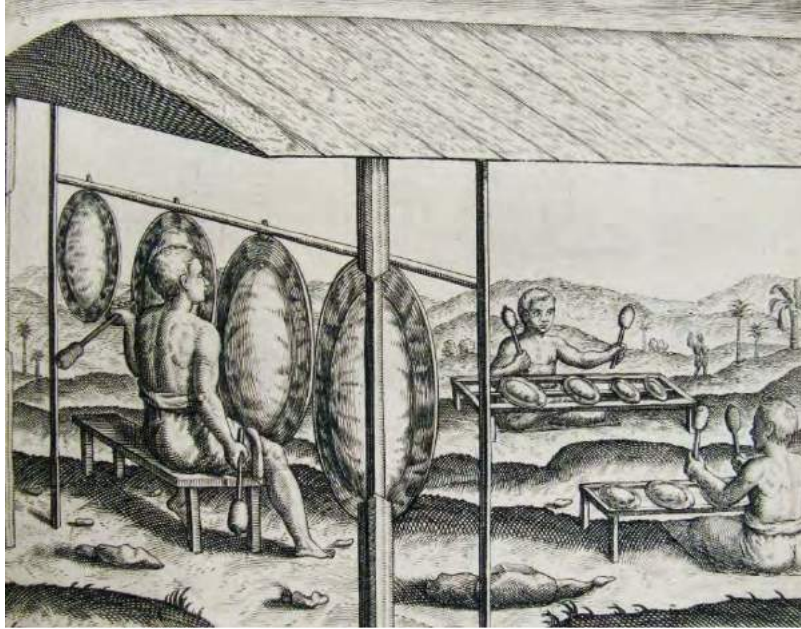


Figure 15 plate XXX: *Charagma Pelvium Sive Cymbalorum, Quibus Lavani Campanarum, Muficorum infumentorum aliorum loco utuntur*

The observation that is to be drawn from de Bry's account of Banten is that Banten was already a powerful and influential commercial center in the East Indies by the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Here we have an account of Banten that features the polity at the height of its economic and political power, and when the success of Banten as a commercial centre had made it a magnet for other itinerant merchant communities from other parts of Asia. The fact that Indians, Arabs, Turks, Persians, Burmese and Chinese were found in the port city is a testament to an earlier period of intra-Asian trade and exchange, captured in K. N. Chaudhuri's (1990) account of Asia before the age of European intervention, and when Asian societies were able to accept and adapt to the realities of cosmopolitanism and pluralism – both cultural and religious – that were the attendant features of global trade then.<sup>6</sup>

Compared to his account of the native Americans of the new world, de Bry's account of Bantenese society presents it as a complex, heteroglot and multicultural space where Asians of different ethnic, cultural, linguistic and religious backgrounds could co-exist and work together in a commercial environment. Ironically, it was Banten's success as a commercial hub that caused envy of the emerging European commercial-colonial powers, and in time to come Banten's pole position as one of the main trading ports of Java would be challenged by the coming the Dutch. In the centuries to



come European colonialism would dismantle the pre-existing social structures and norms of governance that had been developed by the native polities of the region, and through the introduction of the colonial racial census usher in a new era of colonial race-relations where ethnic differences were maintained in order to consolidate a mode of divide-and-rule that was at the heart of the logic of racialized colonial-capitalism. But at the height of its power, Banten was proof that Asian societies could deal with the realities of complexity and pluralism in their own way and on their own terms, and that pluralism was never an alien idea to Asians themselves.

### **C. Conclusion: When the World Came to Banten~Pluralism and Cosmopolitanism in Java in the Seventeenth Century**

To conclude, there are some observations that can be made when gleaming at the images of Banten and the rest of Java in the work of de Bry today: Firstly, they show that even in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries Banten was already a truly complex, plural and diverse polity where different ethnic and religious communities had come together to settle and trade among themselves. That such diversity was present then is of vital importance to us today, living as we do at a time when some quarters in Indonesia and Southeast Asia have expressed their distaste and rejection of pluralism and diversity on the basis of their own sectarian, myopic and exclusive interests. Over the past two decades Indonesia has unfortunately witnessed the rise of groups that reject the pluralism and diversity that is at the heart of Indonesia's republican ethos, and have expressed their desire to expunge all traces of alterity and difference from the public domain.

As de Bry's writings show, such a plural and diverse polity would be against the tide of Indonesian history itself for Indonesia and Indonesians are no strangers to pluralism and diversity at all. In the images we find in de Bry's work, we see Banten society at its economic and political height, precisely when it was such a complex, hybrid and plural polity where inter-ethnic and inter-religious pluralism was accommodated within a mercantilist culture that was open and fluid. Banten's prosperity-which ironically was also the reason why it was seen as a competitor of Western colonial interests-was the result of this long history of inter-communal interaction and exchange that took place on the levels of commerce and culture. To call for a mono-cultural and/or mono-religious Indonesia today would be a denial of Indonesia's multicultural and multi-religious past, and a calculated attack on the history of such dynamic centers such as Banten.

Secondly, it ought to be noted that arguments in favor of pluralism and diversity should not also be pushed too far, to the extent of making observations and conclusions that are unwarranted and unverifiable. Though de Bry's images of a plural Banten society clearly show how complex and dynamic that society was, his text remains muted on the question of interethnic relations and just how (un)cordial these relations might have been. It would not be appropriate, we would argue, to suggest that life was eternally peaceful and harmonious in Banten, as with the rest of Java, at the time, for we also know that Javanese history is replete with records of revolts and uprisings, and some of these were certainly conflicts of an ethnic-religious dimension.

Having said that, it is equally invalid to posit the opposite, for there is no evidence to suggest that the communities that are depicted in the work of de Bry lived in isolation, fear and distrust of one another. The true norm would in all probability have been something in between the two polar opposites: where the Javanese, Indian, Arab, Chinese, Persian and Turkish communities in Banten co-existed with one another in a state of mutual dependency and co-operation for the sake of commerce, and at times inter-civilization dialogue and learning. A perfect, idyllic past is not required for the defense of pluralism and diversity today; for all that is needed is proof that such a plural and complex past did exist once, and that such a past sets a precedent for the pluralism and diversity we see at present.

The worth of de Bry's work lies in the fact that it provides us with one of the earliest accounts of what such a plural past could have looked like, and underscores the important point that pluralism and diversity are and were not 'new' or 'alien' ideas that have been imported into Indonesian society from outside. Banten's plural society was the result of agency and choice among the people of Banten, and this shows that pluralism is as normal to Bantene and Javanese society as *gamelan* and *batik*: Pluralism was not an alien concept in Banten: it was *local*.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>2</sup> Anthony Grafton, *New World, Ancient Texts: The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), p 128.

<sup>3</sup>Grafton, 1992. pp 128-129.

<sup>4</sup>Johann Theodore and Johann Israel De Bry, *Icones Sive Expressae Et Artificiose Delineationes Quarundam Mapparum, Locorum Maritimorum, Insularum, Urbium, & Popularum: Quibus & Horundem Vitae, Naturae, Morum, Habituumque Descriptio Adiunctaest: Veluti Haec Omnia, In India Navigatione Versus Orientem Sucepta, diligenter Obseruata, Adeoque Tribus Hisce Indiae Orientalis Descriptaelibrisinsertafunt.* Johann Theodore de Bry and Johann Israel de Bry, Frankfurt, 1601, Vol. I. p.d.3. Plate XIV

<sup>5</sup>The order of the copperplate engravings is as follows:

Plate XV: Qvae Ratio Conditioe Portvum Et Navivum Stationisadciuitatem Bantam,

Plates XVI and XVII missing

Plate XVIII: Solemnitas Nvptialis Bantam,

Plate XIX: Qvo Ritv Habitvve Dvces Sev Capitanei Per Viampubliceincebant,

Plate XX: Milites In Bantam,

Plate XXI: Extraneorvm Mercatorvm In Bantam,

Plate XXII: Mercantorvm Extraneorvm In Bantam,

Plate XXIII: Mercantorvm Ex China In Bantam,

Plate XXIV: Chinensivm In Bantam Svperstitio Et Idolatria,

Plate XXV: Qvo Ritv Bantani Concilia Militaria Agant,

Plate XXVI: Rusticorvm, Qvi Pridemivxta Civitatem Bantam,

Plate XXVII: Triremes Sev Galiottae Et Fvstae Iavenenfium,

Plate XXVIII: Navivm, Qvibvs Bantani Vtvntvr, Generaquatuor,

Plate XXIX: Chorea Sev Tripvdivm Iavanorvm,

Plate XXX: Charagma Pelvium Sive Cymbalorvm, QvibvsIavani Campanarum, Muficoruminfumentorumaliorum loco vtuntur,

Plate XXXI: Nafaria Obtrvncatio Qvorvndam In Navi Hollandiadieta, a Iauanenfibusinfrituta.

<sup>6</sup> See: K. N. Chaudhuri, *Asia Before Europe: Economy and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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