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A Lamp Falls

□ STORYTELLING

To this day nobody knows exactly what transpired in Selamon on that April night, in the year 1621, except that a lamp fell to the floor in the building where Martijn Sonck, a Dutch official, was billeted.

Selamon is a village in the Banda archipelago, a tiny cluster of islands at the far southeastern end of the Indian Ocean.¹ The settlement is located at the northern end of Lonthor, which is also sometimes referred to as Great Banda (Banda Besar) because it is the largest island in the cluster.² "Great" is a somewhat extravagant epithet for an island that is only two and a half miles in length and half a mile in width—but then, that isn't an insignificant size in an archipelago so minute that on most maps it is marked only by a sprinkling of dots.³

Yet here is Martijn Sonck, on April 21, 1621, halfway around the world from his homeland, in Selamon's *bale-bale*, or meeting hall, which he has requisitioned as a billet for himself and his counselors.⁴ Sonck has also occupied the settlement's most venerable mosque—"a beautiful institution," made of white stone, airy and clean inside, with two large urns of water positioned at the entrance for congregants to wash their feet before stepping in. The elders of the village haven't taken kindly to the seizure of their mosque, but Sonck has brusquely brushed aside their protests, telling them they have plenty of other places to practice their religion.

This is of a piece with everything else that Sonck has done in the short while that he has been on Lonthor Island. He has seized the

nightmare

best houses for his troops, and he has also sent soldiers swarming over the village, terrifying the inhabitants. But these measures are mere preliminaries, intended only to lay the groundwork for what Sonck actually has in mind: he has come to Selamon under orders to destroy the village and expel its inhabitants from this idyllic island, with its lush forests and sparkling blue seas.

The brutality of this plan is such that the villagers have not, perhaps, been able to fully comprehend it yet. But the Dutchman, for his part, has made no secret of his intentions; to the contrary, he has made it perfectly clear to the elders that he expects their full cooperation in the destruction of their own settlement and the expulsion of their fellow villagers.

Nor is Sonck the first Dutch official to deliver this message to Selamon. The villagers, and their fellow Bandanese, have already endured several weeks of threats and shows of force, always accompanied by the same demands: that they tear down the village's walls, surrender their arms and tools—even the rudders of their boats—and make preparations for their imminent removal from the island. The demands are so extreme, so outlandish, that the villagers have, no doubt, wondered whether the Dutchmen are in their right minds. But Sonck has been at pains to let them know that he is in earnest: his commanding officer, none other than the governor-general himself, has run out of patience. The people of Selamon will have to obey his orders down to the last detail.

HOW MUST IT FEEL to find yourself face-to-face with someone who has made it clear that he has the power to bring your world to an end, and has every intention of doing so? *why to what is it address?*

Over the preceding couple of decades the people of Selamon, and their fellow Bandanese, have resisted the Dutch to the best of their abilities; on occasion they have even been able to drive the Europeans away. But they have never had to face a force as large and as well-armed as the one that Sonck has brought with him. Outmatched, they have tried hard to appease Sonck to the best of their ability: while some villagers have fled into the neighboring forests, a good many have stayed on, perhaps hoping that a mistake

Colonial Purpose

actual results

Crazy

Reflection

passion

frustration

has been made and that the Dutch will leave if they manage to hold out.

Those who have remained, many of whom are women and children, have taken care not to give the Dutchmen any excuse for violence. But Sonck has a mission to carry out, one to which he is not particularly well suited—he is a revenue official, not a soldier—and he is probably beset by a feeling of inadequacy. In the villagers' quiescence he senses a seething anger, and he wishes, perhaps, that they would give him an excuse, some pretext for what he needs to do next.

On the night of April 21, when Sonck retires to Selamon's commandeered meeting house with his counselors, his state of mind is very precarious. There is so much tension in the air that the silence seems to augur a seismic eruption.

The atmosphere is such that for someone in Sonck's state it is impossible, perhaps, to see the falling of an object as an ordinary mishap—it has to be a sign of something else, betokening some sinister intent. So when the lamp falls, Sonck jumps instantly to the conclusion that it is a signal, intended to trigger a surprise attack on himself and his soldiers. He and his panicked counselors snatch up their firearms and begin shooting at random. FOCUS

It is a dark night, "as dark as only an Indies night without moonlight can be." In such conditions, when nothing is visible, it is easy to imagine the seething presence of a ghostly army. Sonck and his counselors keep unloosing barrage after barrage at their invisible enemy, startling even their own guards, who have seen no sign of an attack.

□ DESCRIPTIVE

DESCRIPTIVE
THE BANDA ISLANDS sit upon one of the fault lines where the Earth shows itself to be most palpably alive: the islands, and their volcano, are among the offspring of the Ring of Fire that runs from Chile, in the east, to the rim of the Indian Ocean, in the west. A still active volcano, Gunung Api ("Fire Mountain"), towers above the Bandas, its peak perpetually wreathed in plumes of swirling cloud and upwelling steam.

Gunung Api is one of a great number of volcanoes in this

stretch of ocean; the surrounding waters are dotted with beautifully formed, conical mountains that surge majestically out of the waves, some of them rising to heights of a thousand meters or more. The very name of the region, Maluku (which gave birth to the English toponym "Moluccas"), is said to derive from *Molòko*, a word that means "mountain" or "mountain island."⁵

The mountain islands of Maluku often erupt with devastating force, bringing ruin and destruction upon the people who live in their vicinity. Yet there is also something magical about these eruptions, something akin to the pain of childbirth. For the eruptions of Maluku's volcanoes bring to the surface alchemical mixtures of materials which interact with the winds and weather of the region in such a way as to create forests that teem with wonders and rarities. □ DESCRIPTIVE NUTMEG

In the case of the Banda Islands the gift of Gunung Api is a botanical species that has flourished on this tiny archipelago like nowhere else: the tree that produces both nutmeg and mace.

The trees and their offspring were of very different temperaments. The trees were home-loving and did not venture out of their native Maluku until the eighteenth century. Nutmegs and mace, on the other hand, were tireless travelers: how much so is easy to chart, simply because, before the eighteenth century, every single nutmeg and every shred of mace originated in, or around, the Bandas. So it follows that any mention of nutmeg or mace in any text, anywhere, before the 1700s automatically establishes a link with the Bandas. In Chinese texts those mentions date back to the first century before the Common Era; in Latin texts the nutmeg appears a century later.⁶ But nutmegs had probably reached Europe and China long before writers thought to mention them in texts. This was certainly the case in India, where a carbonized nutmeg has been found in an archaeological site that dates back to 400–300 BCE. The first reliably dated textual mention (which is actually of mace) followed two or three centuries later.⁷

Of this there can be no doubt, at any rate: nutmegs had traveled thousands of miles across the oceans long before the first Europeans reached Maluku.⁸ It was these journeys that ultimately brought European navigators to Maluku; they came because plant

→ 1. 1800s
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products like nutmegs had already traveled in the other direction, long before them.⁹

As they made their way across the known world, nutmegs, mace, and other spices brought into being trading networks that stretched all the way across the Indian Ocean, reaching deep into Africa and Eurasia.¹⁰ The nodes and routes of these networks, and the people who were active in them, varied greatly over time, as kingdoms rose and fell, but for more than a millennium the voyages of the nutmeg remained remarkably consistent, growing steadily in both volume and value.

Apart from their culinary uses, nutmegs, cloves, pepper, and other spices were valued also for their medicinal properties.¹¹ In the sixteenth century, the value of the nutmeg soared when doctors in Elizabethan England decided that the spice could be used to cure the plague, epidemics of which were then sweeping through Eurasia.¹² In the late Middle Ages, nutmegs became so valuable in Europe that a handful could buy a house or a ship.¹³ So astronomical was the cost of spices in this era that it is impossible to account for their value in terms of utility alone. They were, in effect, fetishes, primordial forms of the commodity; they were valued because they had become envy-inducing symbols of luxury and wealth, conforming perfectly to Adam Smith's insight that wealth is something that is "desired, not for the material satisfactions that it brings but because it is desired by others."¹⁴

Before the sixteenth century nutmegs reached Europe by changing hands many times, at many points of transit. The latter stages of their journey took them through Egypt, or the Levant, to Venice, which, in the centuries leading up to the voyages of Christopher Columbus and Vasco de Gama, ran a tightly controlled monopoly on the European spice trade.¹⁵ Columbus himself hailed from Venice's archrival, Genoa, where the Serene Republic's monopoly on the Eastern trade had long been bitterly resented; it was in order to break the Venetian hold on the trade that the early European navigators set off on the journeys that led to the Americas and the Indian Ocean.¹⁶ Among their goals, one of the most important was to find the islands that were home to the nutmeg. The stakes were immense, for the navigators and for the monarchs who financed

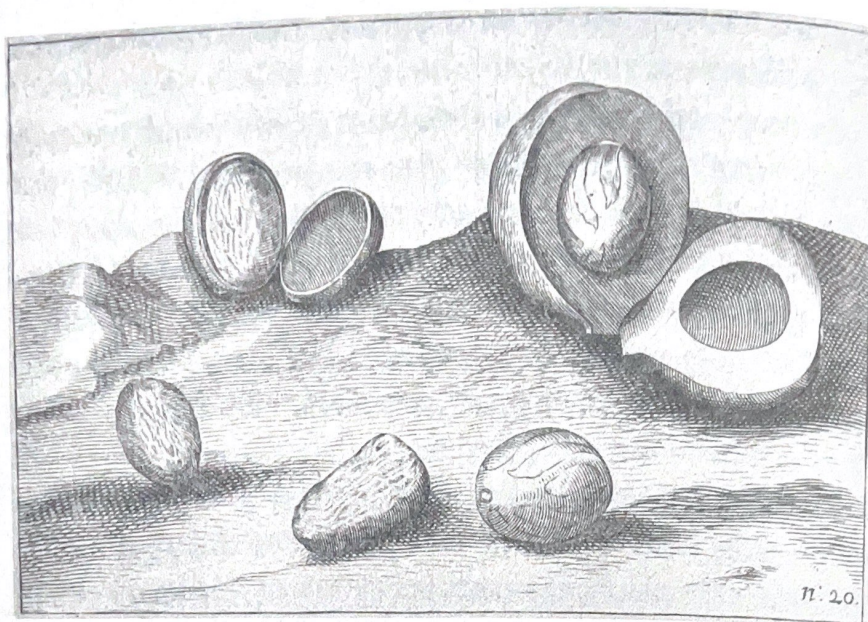


FIGURE 3. Anon, "Banda Islands Nutmeg" (1619). Engraving. Rijksmuseum. Photograph: Wikimedia Commons.

them: the spice race, it has been said, was the space race of its time.¹⁷

Little wonder then that the nutmeg tree had brought Dutchmen like Sonck halfway around the world to the island of Lonthor.

Taking a nutmeg out of its fruit is like unearthing a tiny planet.

Like a planet, the nutmeg is encased within a series of expanding spheres. There is, first of all, the fruit's matte-brown skin, a kind of exosphere. Then there is the pale, perfumed flesh, growing denser toward the core, like a planet's outer atmosphere. And when all the flesh has been stripped away, you have in your hand a ball wrapped in what could be a stratosphere of fiery, crimson clouds: it is this fragrant outer sleeve that is known as mace. Stripping off the mace reveals yet another casing, a glossy, ridged, chocolate-colored carapace, which holds the nut inside like a protective troposphere. Only when this shell is cracked open do you have the nut in your palm, its surface clouded by matte-brown continents floating on patches of ivory.

And should you then break the nut open, you will see inside

SMILE
NUTMEG = PLANET

is a key to read the end

something akin to a geological structure—except that it is composed of the unique mixture of substances that produces the aroma, and the psychotropic effects, that are the nut's very own superpowers.

Like a planet, a nutmeg too can never be seen in its entirety at one time. As with the moon, or any spherical (or quasi-spherical) object, a nutmeg has two hemispheres; when one is in the light, the other must be in darkness—for one to be seen by the human eye, the other must be hidden.

THE ISLAND OF LONTHOR is shaped like a boomerang, and it adjoins two other islands: Gunung Api and Banda Naira, a tiny islet that was already, in 1621, the seat of two massive Dutch forts. The three islands are themselves the remnants of an exploded volcano, grouped around its now-submerged crater.¹⁸ Between them lies a stretch of sheltered water that is deep enough to accommodate oceangoing ships. Anchored there on the night of April 21 is the fleet that has brought Martijn Sonck to the Banda Islands.

On still nights sounds carry easily across this stretch of water. The rattle of agitated musket fire on Lonthor is clearly heard on the *Nieuw-Hollandia*, the flagship of the commander who has brought this fleet to the Bandas: Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen.

An accountant by training, Coen, at the age of thirty-three, has served as the governor-general of the East Indies for three years already. A man of immense energy, competence, and determination, he has risen through the ranks of the Dutch East India Company like a jet of volcanic ash. Known, behind his back, as De Schraale ("Old Skin and Bones"), he is a blunt, ruthless man, not given to mincing his words.¹⁹ In a letter to the Seventeen Gentlemen who preside over the Company, Governor-General Coen once observed: "There is nothing in the world that gives one a better right than power."²⁰

Now the most powerful proconsul of the world's mightiest commercial company, Coen is no stranger to the Banda Islands.²¹ He was here twelve years earlier, as a member of a Dutch force that came to negotiate a treaty with the Bandanese.²² During the nego-

tiations a part of that force was ambushed on the shores of Banda Naira and forty-six Dutchmen, including the leading officer, were slaughtered by the Bandanese.²³ Coen was among those who got away with his life, but his memories of this episode have shaped his view of the Dutch mission in the Banda Islands.²⁴

Ever since the first Dutch ships came to the archipelago it has been the aim of the venerable East India Company—the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC—to impose a trade monopoly on the Bandanese.²⁵ But this goal has proved elusive because the concept of a trading monopoly, although common in Europe, is completely foreign to the commercial traditions of the Indian Ocean.²⁶ In these waters entrepôts and maritime states have always competed with each other to attract as many foreign merchants as possible. It was in this spirit that the Bandanese welcomed the first party of Europeans to visit their islands: a small Portuguese contingent that included Ferdinand Magellan. That was back in 1512; in the years since, the Bandanese have discovered (to their cost) that the Europeans who come to their shores, no matter of what nationality, all have the same thing in mind: a treaty granting them an exclusive right to the islands' nutmegs and mace.²⁷

But such a right is impossible for the Bandanese to grant. How can they refuse to trade with their accustomed business partners, from shores near and far? The islanders depend on their neighbors for food and much else.²⁸ Besides, the Bandanese are themselves skilled traders, and many of them have close links with other merchant communities in the Indian Ocean; they can hardly turn their friends away empty-handed.²⁹ Nor would that make commercial sense, since the Europeans often don't pay as well as Asian buyers. And the Bandanese, like most Asians, don't find European goods particularly desirable: what are they, with their warm climate, to do with woolen cloth, for instance?³⁰

It would have been easier for the Dutch if the Bandanese had had a powerful ruler, a sultan who could be coerced into compliance, as had happened on other islands in Maluku.³¹ But the Banda Islands have no single ruler who can be threatened and bullied into forcing his subjects to obey the foreigners' demands.³² "They have neither king nor lord" was the conclusion of the first Portuguese

VOC = East India Company

Lebrun's
MIND

the
Paganus's
descript

the
sultan

navigators to visit the islands, "and all their government depends on the advice of their elders; and as these are often at variance, they quarrel among themselves."³³

This is not the whole truth, of course. The Bandanese have aristocratic lineages, as well as merchant families that possess great wealth and many servitors. It is a combative society, divided into walled settlements that sometimes fight pitched battles against each other.³⁴ But no single settlement or family has ever subdued the entire archipelago; the islanders seem to have a deep-seated distaste for centralized, unitary rule.

Bandanese tradition has it that the islands were once ruled by four kings.³⁵ But by the time the first Dutch ships came to the archipelago, the only figures of authority there were a few dozen elders and *orang-kaya*, which means literally "men of wealth."³⁶ A few of these elders carry the title of harbormaster, or *Shahbandar*, but neither they nor any of the *orang-kaya* possess the political authority to enforce a treaty on the entire archipelago, tiny though it is.³⁷

Yet the Europeans—first the Portuguese and Spanish, and then the Dutch—have for more than a hundred years insistently pursued the goal of establishing a monopoly over the islanders' most important products: nutmeg and mace.³⁸ The most relentless of all are the Dutch; they have sent fleets to the islands again and again, with the intention of forcing treaties on the inhabitants.³⁹ The islanders have resisted as best they could, often accepting help from other Europeans.⁴⁰ But the Bandanese are too few in number—there are only about fifteen thousand of them altogether—to fight the world's most powerful navy.⁴¹ With great reluctance their elders have signed several treaties, sometimes without knowing what they said (the documents were in Dutch).⁴² But covertly they have continued to trade with other merchants, and whenever possible they have also resisted with arms, as they did in 1609, when they ambushed the party of Dutchmen that included the future governor-general, Jan Pieterszoon Coen.⁴³

In the aftermath of that slaughter Coen has come to believe—as had some of his predecessors—that *die Bandaneezen* are incorrigible and that the Banda problem needs a final solution: the islands must be emptied of their inhabitants. Unless that is accomplished

political
dynasty of
Javanese

EXITING
SOURCE

the VOC will never be able to establish a monopoly on nutmeg and mace. Once the Bandanese are gone, settlers and slaves can be brought in to create a new economy in the archipelago. This will be a departure from the usual Dutch practice, which is to focus on trade and avoid territorial acquisitions.⁴⁴ But since the nutmeg trade is synonymous with the Bandas, it can't be helped.⁴⁵ And the sooner it's done, the better: the English, who have been snapping at the heels of the Dutch from the Americas to the East Indies, have recently established a toehold in the Bandas, on a tiny island called Run.⁴⁶ Coen is determined not to allow them to expand their footprint in the archipelago.

Writing to the directors of the VOC, Coen has noted: "It would be best in my opinion to completely chase all the Bandanese from the land"—and it is with exactly this in mind that he has come to the Banda Islands now.⁴⁷ To get the job done as efficiently as possible he has added a contingent of eighty Japanese mercenaries to his forces: they are *ronin*, or masterless samurai. Not only are they cheaper and hardier than European soldiers, they are also professional swordsmen and highly skilled executioners, experts in the arts of decapitation and dismemberment.⁴⁸

THE MYSTERY OF Selamon's lamp probably wouldn't have taken hold of my mind to the extent that it did, if it were not for an uncanny intersection between human and nonhuman forms of agency.

I began writing this chapter in early March of 2020, at just the time when a microscopic entity, the newest coronavirus, was quickly becoming the largest, most threatening, and most inescapable presence on the planet. As cars and people vanished from the streets of Brooklyn, where I live, a peculiar sense of dislocation set in. Reading the notes I had made on my visit to the Banda Islands in November 2016, I sometimes had the eerie sense of having returned incorporeally to the archipelago.

On that visit I had stayed in a hotel built by a man called Des Alwi, who had once been known as the Raja of the Bandas. A member of one of the most prominent families in the islands, Alwi, who died in 2010, is remembered by everyone who knew him as

an unusually charismatic, larger-than-life presence. An author and diplomat, he had established a foundation dedicated to the preservation of the islands' heritage. Apart from restoring many crumbling colonial buildings, the foundation had also printed a few books and pamphlets, among them an introduction to the history of the islands written by a friend of Des Alwi's, an American historian called Willard A. Hanna. It was in this book, titled *Indonesian Banda: Colonialism and Its Aftermath in the Nutmeg Islands*, that I first read about the lamp that fell in Selamon on the night of April 21, 1621.

The detail was mentioned only in passing, but it haunted me. Why had such a simple, everyday mishap caused so much panic amongst Sonck's contingent of Dutch soldiers?

During the stillness of those Brooklyn nights, when the silence was broken only by the sirens of speeding ambulances, it was possible to imagine that a sudden and unexpected sound might remind everyone of the invisible nonhuman presences that surround us, intervening in everyday life in ways that completely transform the meaning of ordinary events.

Not far from my house is one of Brooklyn's largest hospitals. At that time Covid-19 was claiming so many lives that the bodies of the dead were being stacked outside, in refrigerated trucks. When I stepped out of my house I could sense fear seething in the streets around me, and this induced a sense of kinship with the terror-struck villagers of Selamon, as they lay huddled in their homes, wondering if the fall of the lamp was a portent of worse things to come.

I wanted to know more about the fall of that lamp. But how? The difficulties of throwing light on a moment four centuries in the past become vastly greater when the setting is a place as remote and forgotten as the Banda archipelago. Few indeed are the scholars who have written about the Bandas, so the events of 1621 are shrouded in obscurity, skimmed over even in most histories and ethnographies of the region.⁴⁹ Where then had Hanna found this detail? As I combed through his book, it became clear that his main source was a monograph called *De Vestiging van het Nederlandsche Gezag over de Banda-Eilanden (1599–1621)* (The establishment of

of my study, in what had once been the Dutch village of Breukelen, I began to type entire pages into the app, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph. Soon it was as if two nonhuman entities, the internet and the coronavirus, both operating at a planetary scale, had come together to create a ghostly portal to transport me, through the spirit of a long-dead Dutchman, to the Banda Islands on the night of April 21, 1621.

WHAT POSSIBLE BEARING could the story of something as cheap and insignificant as the nutmeg have on the twenty-first century?

After all, what happened in the Banda Islands was merely one instance of a history of colonization that was then unfolding on a vastly larger scale on the other side of the Earth, in the Americas. It might be said that the page has been turned on that chapter of history: that the twenty-first century bears no resemblance to that long-ago time when plants and botanical matter could decide the fate of human beings. The modern era, it is often asserted, has freed humanity from the Earth, and propelled it into a new age of progress in which human-made goods take precedence over natural products.

The trouble is that none of the above is true.

We are today even *more* dependent on botanical matter than we were three hundred years (or five hundred, or even five millennia) ago, and not just for our food. Most contemporary humans are completely dependent on energy that comes from long-buried carbon—and what are coal, oil, and natural gas except fossilized forms of botanical matter?

As for the circulation of goods, in that too fossil fuels vastly outweigh any category of human-made goods. In the words of two energy economists: "Energy is the most important commodity in the world today. And by almost any metric, the energy industry is impossibly large. Yearly energy sales at over 10 trillion dollars dwarf expenditures on any other single commodity; trade and transport of energy is immense with over 3 trillion dollars in international transactions driving product deliveries through 2 million kilometers of pipelines and 500 million deadweight tons of merchant

shipping; 8 of the 10 largest global corporations are energy companies; and a third of the global shipping fleet is occupied shipping oil. Given these figures it may not be surprising that world energy consumption takes the energy equivalent of over 2800 barrels of oil per second to quench."⁵² If we were to add up the sum total of all goods that were moving along the sea and land routes of the Middle Ages, we would probably find that manufactured articles, like porcelain and textiles, accounted for a greater proportion of trade than they do now.

If we put aside the myth-making of modernity, in which humans are triumphantly free of material dependence on the planet, and acknowledge the reality of our ever-increasing servitude to the products of the Earth, then the story of the Bandanese no longer seems so distant from our present predicament. To the contrary, the continuities between the two are so pressing and powerful that it could even be said that the fate of the Banda Islands might be read as a template for the present, if only we knew how to tell that story.

How to tell the story?
see narrative structure of g host text