The colonial official as ethnographer

VOC documents as resources for social history in eastern Indonesia

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ABSTRACT
The present article departs from the inherent problems of grasping the voice of the subaltern other in a colonial context. While postcolonial theoreticians have occasionally spoken pessimistically about the possibilities of reconstructing the agency of dominated categories of non-Westerners, recent research on early Southeast Asia has on the contrary envisaged new lines of inquiry through an ingenious use of the extant sources, preferably through interdisciplinary communication. But can we use the colonial archive in order to highlight social history in non-literate societies such as those of eastern Indonesia where the colonial texts do not resonate with the indigenous ones? This article scrutinizes materials from the VOC (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie) post in Kupang (1653-1800) in order to find data usable for such a history. It is argued that letters, reports, legal minutes, diaries, etcetera. have a good potential due to the regularity and minute detail of the record.

KEYWORDS
colonial archive, ethnography, VOC documents, social history, eastern Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION
The present study aims to explore the colonial archive as a source not only for our knowledge of colonial encounters and confrontations, but also for mapping social structures of non-Western societies which did not have a literate tradition. Research for the present study was made possible through funding by the Swedish Research Council (Vetenskapsrådet). The work has been undertaken within the interdisciplinary

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