

A preliminary investigation into the history of the old fort at Maubara

Steven Farram

There are a number of forts on Timor built by the European contestants for colonial control of the island; the Dutch, who prevailed in the western half, and the Portuguese, who came to control the eastern half of the island. The Portuguese had been active in Timor since the sixteenth century and retained a presence there until 1975. Such a long presence makes it easy to overlook the fact that the present borders on Timor were only formalised in 1916, and until at least the mid-nineteenth century, the Dutch and Portuguese were actively campaigning for territorial control. One result of this rivalry is that one of the best-known forts in the former Portuguese-controlled areas, the Maubara fort, initially completed in 1760, was originally built by the Dutch. To date, the fort has received little attention from researchers. This paper is a preliminary attempt to alter that situation and examines the history of the Dutch claim to Maubara; the circumstances surrounding the erection of the fort; and the reasons for its abandonment by the Dutch to the Portuguese in 1861.

Background

It is likely that the Portuguese first ventured to Timor in the early sixteenth century, lured by the sandalwood trade. They did not establish themselves in the region, however, until 1561, when they settled on the island Solor, north of Timor. In 1613, the Dutch, organised in the VOC (Dutch East India Company), came to Solor and drove away the Portuguese, who moved to Larantuka on Flores. In 1653, the Dutch established a base at Kupang, in western Timor. In the meantime, the Eurasians and local Christians of Larantuka, known as Topasses, were also active in the sandalwood trade. The Topasses established a base at Lifau, in the present Timor-Leste enclave of Ambeno-Oecusse. They often collaborated with the Portuguese, but were fiercely independent and formed a third force seeking control of the region (Farram 1999, 40-1).

In 1668, the Dutch made alliances with Manatuto and other principalities (Alderwerelt 1904, 195), but they could offer them little assistance and the Portuguese later pressured those principalities to renounce the alliances (Heyman 1895, 8). Dutch fortunes revived after the defeat of a major Topass force during the battle of Penfui in 1749. In 1753, an expedition left for Manatuto to bring it and other places under Dutch authority once again (Alderwerelt 1904, 198, 201). What happened to that expedition is yet to be confirmed by further research, but control of Manatuto continued to be contested for many years.

In 1756, VOC Commissioner Paravicini arrived in Kupang and convinced fifteen Timorese rulers to make alliances. Paravicini may have misled the Timorese, as many of them already had alliances with the Portuguese (Heyman 1895, 12-3). Nevertheless, Paravicini impressed Governor-General Mossel, who concurred with his view that the Dutch would never make a profit in Timor unless they expelled the Portuguese (Fiedler 1931, 17-1, 31).

In 1757, as part of Dutch attempts to extend their influence, a Dutch post with an interpreter was established at Manatuto, and in 1759 a garrison was established at Liquiçá. Meanwhile, Ermera and other places in present-day Timor-Leste declared loyalty to the Dutch (Alderwerelt 1904, 202, 204). Maubara was considered an ally because it was known as a dependency of Waiwiku-Wehale, a powerful kingdom on the south coast of the island that had signed Paravicini's contract. In 1759, however, Maubara made its own contract with the Dutch (Heyman 1895, 33). In that year, an interpreter was posted at Maubara, where a stone with the VOC crest was erected. The following year, the 'kings' of Maubara and the 'kings' of Cutubaba and Cailaco visited Kupang, making a total of ten Maubara 'kings' who had become Dutch allies (Alderwerelt 1904, 197-204).

The fort established

In 1703, Maubara was reported as one of the few eastern Timor principalities that did not acknowledge Portuguese superiority. In 1710 and 1723, however, Maubara paid tribute to the Portuguese, and in 1726 Maubara troops fought alongside the Portuguese to put down a rebellion in Cailaco (Matos 1974, 156, 338-9, 368-73). Nevertheless, in 1755, an ensign of the *Mardijkers* (non-European soldiers employed by the Dutch) met with the Maubara ruler, Dom José Xavier Doutel, who requested help against the Portuguese and was supplied with lead and gunpowder. In 1758, a group of *Mardijkers* in Maubara helped fight off an attack by the *Topasses*. Later, the Portuguese sent men from Flores to capture or kill Dom José, but the plot failed. Kupang then accepted Maubara's offer of allegiance and sent a force to build a fort there, as a base for contact with places further east (Hägerdal n.d.; Fiedler 1931, 17-2, 31). In 1760, the fort was completed. The Portuguese attacked soon after, but were defeated and chased away (Hägerdal n.d.). In the meantime, the Maubara 'kings' of Maloa, Balibo, Vehilara and Tonaro submitted to the Dutch (Alderwerelt 1904, 206; the last two places have not yet been identified by the author).

The fort abandoned

In 1762, an order was given by the governor-general in Batavia to demolish the fort, 'as no benefit has been produced' (Alderwerelt 1904, 208). It seems, however, that the fort was not demolished. Instead, most of the soldiers were recalled, with only a token garrison of twelve retained (Hägerdal n.d.). It would appear that even this small force was not kept there for long, and Maubara was then left to defend itself (Alderwerelt 1904, 220). What had caused this extraordinary reversal of policy?

The Kupang headman from 1758, H.A. von Plüskow, was strongly in favour of removing the Portuguese from Timor and appears to have been chosen by Governor-General Mossel for this purpose (Fiedler 1931, 17-1, 33). However, Plüskow's actions resulted in disaster. In 1761, the Portuguese governor sought refuge in Kupang after being forced to flee Lifau by the *Topasses*. Plüskow offered to restore him by force. After a Dutch expedition was sent to Lifau, the *Topasses* agreed to submit. However, when Plüskow went to accept their submission, he and all of his retinue were murdered. Mossel's replacement, Van der Parra, showed little sympathy for their deaths, stating that it was Plüskow's own fault, as he had meddled in affairs that could bring no profit for the VOC. Furthermore, he prohibited the incurrence of any further cost in checking the *Topasses* (Alderwerelt 1904, 207-8). In 1769, the Portuguese established a capital at Dili, further east, where they grew ever stronger. The Dutch gradually dropped their claims in the east, except in Maubara (Heyman 1895, 8-9). Yet even there they realised that they were likely to reap more costs than benefits.

Sporadic Dutch association with Maubara

In 1763, Maubara was one of only four places in the Timor region supplied by the Dutch with an interpreter (Alderwerelt 1904, 209). In the same year, Dom José came to Kupang bringing presents of beeswax and sandalwood. In 1764, he wrote to Kupang announcing his interest in becoming a Protestant and requesting school teachers, but the Dutch could not spare the resources (Hägerdal n.d.). In 1765, the Dutch conferred the titles 'Don' and 'Kapitien' on the son of the Maubara 'king'. The 'king' received a baton of authority from the Dutch during that year, as did 'kings' from Balibo, Ermera and Vilara (presumably the previously unidentified Vehilara). Various other principalities exchanged gifts with the Dutch, including Lissadilla, also in the Maubara region. In 1766, the Dutch gave Maubara some unspecified 'help against its enemies' (Alderwerelt 1904, 209-10); the help given was probably in the shape of ammunition, while Maubara's main enemies continued to be nearby principalities that had allied themselves with the Portuguese.

In 1776, Dom José was succeeded by his son Dom Caletto Xavier Doutel, but Dom Caletto was challenged by his uncle, Dom Paulo, who sided with the Portuguese. In 1778, some Maubara village chiefs received flags and weapons from the Dutch, but later surrendered them to the Portuguese (Alderwerelt 1904, 216-7; Hägerdal n.d.). It was also reported that the stone with the VOC crest at Maubara was sent to

Macau. In 1779, Dom Caletto wrote to Kupang seeking an interpreter, soldiers and ammunition, but only received a few rifles and some gunpowder. Dom Caletto continued his fight against Dom Paulo and the Portuguese well into the 1780s and eventually prevailed. Despite the meagre Dutch assistance he had received, he continued to declare his loyalty (Hägerdal n.d.).

In 1792, Maubara again sought help from Kupang and it was agreed it could be provided secretly through the 'emperor' of Amakono, a Dutch vassal. The Dutch were then unsure of their rights in Maubara as opposed to those of the Portuguese, as they had effectively abandoned it after 1762. Also, as the VOC's finances were in difficulty, they were attempting to cut costs (Alderwerelt 1904, 220). In 1794, Dom Caletto died and his son appealed hastily to Kupang to recognise his rule, as he was worried that if a new ruler was not presented quickly the people would turn to the Portuguese. His request was acceded (Hägerdal n.d.), but Maubara was by then of little importance to the Dutch.

The connection gets weaker

In 1800, the VOC's possessions passed to the Netherlands government. In the meantime, war between Britain and France, and the associated French annexation of the Netherlands, led the British to occupy many Dutch possessions, including Kupang in 1812. The Portuguese took advantage of this occurrence to force their claims for several districts, including Maubara. When the interpreter A.C. Muller arrived at Oecusse en route to Maubara in April 1812, he was told that it was Portuguese territory. The Portuguese commander of Batugade later warned the captain of Muller's ship that if he went to Maubara his vessel would be confiscated and his head would be chopped off. Muller's captain would not risk the trip and they returned to Kupang (Lambert 1812). Following the restoration of Dutch rule, however, the Portuguese appear to have accepted that Maubara was Dutch, as *resident* J.A. Hazaart wrote to the Portuguese governor in 1817, apparently in reply to a request for the Dutch government to control its vassal. Hazaart apologised for Maubara assisting enemies of the Portuguese and for giving refuge to runaway slaves, and assured his counterpart that Maubara had been rebuked (pers. comm. H. Hägerdal, 26 March 2011, based on Hazaart 1818).

In the following years, Dutch interest in Maubara reached its lowest ebb. In 1837, two men from an English ship were murdered there. The British demanded the prosecution of the offenders, but the government in Batavia was unsure if Maubara was Dutch or Portuguese territory and called for an officer to investigate (Heyman 1895, 33). Then, in 1849, A.G. Brouwer reported that the tyrannical behaviour of the Maubara 'king', Don Caletto, had resulted in him being abandoned by his *fettor* (district headman) and most of his subjects. In the resulting conflict, both Don Caletto and his *fettor* sought assistance from allies of the Portuguese (Veth 1855, 128-9).

Maubara is offered to the Portuguese

After establishing their capital at Dili in 1769, the Portuguese exerted great influence in the surrounding districts. One result was that Maubara was encircled by Portuguese allies. For two centuries the Dutch had tried to force the Portuguese out of Timor, but with little success. In 1817, the Dutch governor-general had proposed that the Portuguese sell their Timor possessions, but the Portuguese refused. In 1851, the Dutch were more successful. On 1 August 1851, a Dutch-Portuguese commission met in Dili to discuss their territories' borders. The Dutch offered 200,000 guilders (80,000 in cash), and the cession of Maubara in return for all Portuguese claims in Flores and the Solor archipelago, excepting the island of Atauro. The Portuguese were apparently so short of funds that Governor Lopes de Lima accepted the offer readily, although he was later recalled in disgrace. Nevertheless, negotiations continued and the mutual cession of territories was formally acknowledged in 1859 (Farram 1999, 42-4).

The handover

In January 1861, Lieutenant L.W.A. Kessler received notification that the treaty for ‘Timor and subordinate islands’ between the Netherlands and Portugal had been concluded on 20 April 1859, and it was his duty to oversee the handover of Maubara. Kessler summonsed the ‘heads’ of Maubara to Atapupu to explain to them what would happen. *Radja* Don Joseph and the ‘head’ Boussa were indisposed and could not attend, but Don Joseph’s son Naga Bata appeared, as well as *fettor* Datoe Lau and *radja* Mau Lay. There was also *kolonel* Don Karlo, whom Kessler described as ‘the man who properly had the most to say’ (Kessler 1891, 254-5).

Kessler showed them on a map how Maubara was surrounded by Portuguese allies and explained that the two governments had agreed that Maubara should also be under Portuguese control. The Maubara representatives accepted this, but claimed to be hurt as they had always been loyal to the Dutch. Furthermore, their oral traditions told them that the Portuguese had inflicted great cruelties upon their ancestors. Kessler assured them that such things would not occur again. The following day, in the presence of the Portuguese commander of Batugade, the Maubara representatives signed a document stating their willingness to submit to the Portuguese. Don Karlo and Mau Lay then accompanied Kessler to Dili, where they were given a Portuguese flag (Kessler 1891, 256-8).

The next day, a Portuguese ship with an officer and some soldiers left Dili for Maubara, while Kessler travelled in a Dutch cruiser; Don Karlo and his retinue travelled overland. The two ships arrived off Maubara on the morning of 1 April 1861, but Kessler and the others did not disembark until Don Karlo arrived in the afternoon. Kessler made a speech explaining the handover and Don Karlo repeated it in the local language; presumably Tocado. Following that, Kessler ‘drank with them to eternal friendship’. Kessler then lowered and raised the Dutch flag three times, each time greeted by a salute from the Portuguese ship. He then repeated the exercise with the Portuguese flag, this time with salutes from the Dutch ship; on the third occasion he left it flying at the head of the flagstaff (Kessler 1891, 258-9).

The Portuguese then handed out gifts and Kessler presented the Dutch flag as a memento to Don Karlo. The brief ceremony was completed and Kessler reboarded his ship (Kessler 1891, 259-60). In the following decades, Maubara was often in conflict with the Portuguese, with revolts there in the 1870s and 1890s. During those times, Maubara looked for assistance across the border, but all requests for help to its old ally in Kupang were refused (Davidson 1994, 69-71).

Is the present fort the original?

Although unstated, it seems clear from Kessler’s account that the handover took place at the fort, which is right on the beachfront and would have been the only likely place to have had a flagstaff. It is, however, not clear that the fort in Maubara today is the one completed in 1760. That fort was described as round with eight protruding bastions (Alderwerelt 1904, 205). The present fort is virtually rectangular. Spillett (1999) was told by ‘the guardian of the Fort’ that the structure at Maubara was built by the Dutch in 1844, but abandoned in 1850, when negotiations over territory began. This is possible, although it is difficult to imagine that the Dutch held the fort during the chaotic period described in 1849. Possibly the fort was re-built by the Portuguese, but it seems unlikely, as an 1870 report, only nine years after the handover, suggests that the fort was then in a rundown condition (Boletim 1870). A more recent Portuguese report supposes that the fort is Dutch, but that it had been restored by the Indonesians (Thomaz 2000, 46). My research continues and hopefully I can report on any re-building of the fort in a future publication.

Conclusion

The Dutch arrived in the Timor region in 1613 and immediately found themselves in competition with the Portuguese. In 1653, they established a base in Kupang, but had little authority elsewhere on Timor. The Portuguese position was hardly better and the real power in the competition for sandalwood was the Topasses. In 1749, the Dutch achieved victory over the Topasses and subsequently launched a campaign to

extend their influence throughout Timor. One result of this was the Dutch alliance with Maubara, which they thought would be a base for expanding their influence further east. In 1760, a fort and garrison was established at Maubara, but the soldiers were withdrawn a few years later and Dutch support for Maubara became sporadic. Gradually, the Portuguese became more entrenched in eastern Timor and the Dutch forgot their old plans of driving them away. In 1859, the Dutch and Portuguese agreed to measures to bring greater certainty to their territorial claims in Timor. Those measures included the cession to the Portuguese of the Dutch claim to Maubara. On 1 April 1861, a ceremony was held at Maubara, during which the Dutch flag was lowered for the last time and the Portuguese one hoisted in its place. The ceremony marked the end of Dutch ambitions to control the eastern half of the island, but the fort remains as a reminder that such thoughts were once entertained.

Bibliography

- Alderwerelt, J. de Roo van 1904, 'Aanteekeningen over Timor en Onderhoorigheden 1668 tot en met 1809', *Tijdschrift voor Indisch Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 47(3): 195-226.
- Boletim 1870, 'Viagem da corvets sà da bandeira a Timor (Continuação do no. 28)', *Boletim da Provincia de Maucau e Timor*, XVI(45): 189-190.
- Davidson, K.G. 1994, 'The Portuguese colonisation of Timor: The final stage, 1850, 1912', PhD thesis, University of New South Wales.
- Farram, S. 1999, 'The two Timors: The partitioning of Timor by the Portuguese and the Dutch', *Studies in languages and cultures of East Timor*, 2: 38-54.
- Fiedler, H. 1931, 'Hans Albrecht v. Plüskow, Geschichte eines kleinen Kontors V.C.O. 1758-1761', *Deutsche Wacht*, 17-1: 31-35, 17-2: 27-35.
- Hägerdal, H. n.d. 'Maubara', unpublished manuscript based on Dutch archives; author's collection.
- Hazaart, J.A. 1818, 'Letter from Hazaart to Joze Pinto, G. v. Dilie, 25 October 1817', in *Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta, Arsip Timor*, 1818, no. 34.
- Heyman, A. 1895. *De Timor Tractaten (1859 en 1893)*, S.C. van Doesburgh, Leiden.
- Lambert, C. 1812, 'Statements from "folk" A. Muller and Chinese trader/captain, 1812', in *Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia, Jakarta, Algemeene Secretarie, Arsip Timor*, 1616-1890, no. 21.
- Matos, A.T. de 1974, *Timor Português, 1515-1769: contribuição para a sua história*, Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa, Instituto Histórico Infante Dom Henrique, Lisbon.
- Spillett, P.G. 1999, 'The pre-colonial history of the island of Timor, together with some notes on the Makassan influence in the island', unpublished manuscript, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin.
- Thomaz, L.F.F.R. 2000, *Reconhecimento preliminary património histórico-cultural subsistente em Timor-Leste: Relatório da visita ao território efectuada em fevereiro de 2000 A.D.*, Lisbon.
- Veth, P.J. 1855, 'Het Eiland Timor', offprint of *De Gids*, 8-1: 546-611, 8-2: 55-100.