The Central Administration of the VOC Government and the Local Institutions of Batavia (1619-1811) – an Introduction

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I. Introduction

On 30 May 1619 the VOC conquered the Javanese port town of Jaccatra. This gave the VOC a permanent harbour and a repair dock for its ships, central warehouse facilities for trade, and a governmental and administrative centre. Jaccatra (now called Batavia) was the hub of the central administration of the VOC in Asia; the Governor-General and Councillors of the Indies (Asia), usually referred to as the High Government in the sources. The central administrative bodies and the dwellings of the Company officials – from high to low – were concentrated in the heavily guarded complex, Batavia Castle. The Castle was demolished under Governor-General Daendels (1808-1811). On 17 September 1811 his successor, Governor-General J.W. Janssens, signed the capitulation to the English in Salatiga. Hence this date marks the chronological cut-off point for this introduction.1

Taking pride of place in this inventory are the archives which were kept in Batavia Castle in the VOC era. Although many of the Castle archives were thrown away under Daendels, much has still survived. This introduction gives a brief survey of the various administrative bodies and the urban boards.2 In Section II the central institutions for government and justice in the Castle are examined:

1. The High Government (1609-1811);
2. The High Commission (1791-1799);
3. The General Audit Office (1808-1811);
4. The Court of Justice (1620-1809).

In Section III attention shifts to the urban administrative bodies in Batavia. There were various urban boards which performed their duties taking their counterparts in the larger Dutch cities as their example. In the archives these bodies are usually referred to as colleges. The duties of these bodies were laid down in 1642 in a series of detailed regulations. These Bataviase Statuten were published in Volume I of the Nederlandsch-Indisch Plankaartboek 1602-1811.3 The multitude of additions and changes made by the High Government were finally set out in the Nieuwe Bataviase Statuten (New Batavian Statutes) (1766). Even though these new 1766 statutes were never formally put into effect, they still form the best introduction to the many procedures and regulations which had changed since 1642.

Researchers who want to work in the archives of the Batavian colleges are advised to read the New Statutes of 1766 first.

In a logical order of succession directly after the urban boards come the notaries who were working in Batavia. After all, their records were largely compiled for the convenience of the urban institutions and boards. Consequently Section III is arranged as follows:

1. The College of Aldermen (1617-1811);
2. The Board of the Governors of the Orphan Chamber (1624-1885);
3. College van Heemraden (District Council) (1664-1809);
4. The Board of Matrimonial Affairs and Minor Court Cases (1656-1812);
5. The Board of Trustees for Deceased Estates of Chinese and Other Non-Christian Bereaved (1640-1885);

Officially the urban boards were subordinate to the High Government. Nevertheless, in their daily business they could perform their duties more or less independently. Unofficially the influence of the Governor-General was very palpable. His will was law. Formally, because of its right of nomination the High Government could exert direct influence on the appointment of new members of any institution. The decisions which the boards took were also subject to the approval of the High Government. Moreover, each year all the boards were financially accountable to the High Government. Despite this, as just said in their day-to-day activities the boards were free to act as they wanted, and the High Government could not possibly intervene in all sentences, marriages, legacies and the like.

All notaries who practised in Batavia also worked as independent businessmen. However, they required the permission of the High Government to pursue their profession and they were also scrutinized by the Court of Justice.
The records they have left which include many contracts between citizens bring us closer to private enterprise in the multi-ethnic colonial society.

In Section IV the ecclesiastical boards are discussed:
1. The Church Council of the Dutch-, Portuguese-, and Malay- language Reformed congregations in Batavia (1621);
2. The Poor Relief Board (1648);
3. The Board of Churchwardens (1655);
4. The Reformed Church Council of Semarang (1753);
5. The Church Council of the Lutheran Church in Batavia (1746).

Each of these ecclesiastical bodies built up its own archives. The church archive of Semarang was once in the possession of the still extant eighteenth-century church in Semarang. It is not known when these Semarang records were taken to Batavia. Officially, the Board of Churchwardens was not an ecclesiastical but a secular organization. The churchwardens were responsible for the management of church buildings and church property, the arrangement of funerals and supervision of cemeteries. These five institutions kept baptismal, marriage, and burial registers, which were later moved to the archive of the Civil Registry.

In Section V all the other institutions and persons are dealt with: the Amfioen Society and Directorate and the Batavian Loan-Bank and Deposit Bank; and finally the Engelhard Collection. This is the archive of Nicholaas Engelhard, a Governor of the North-East Coast of Java (1801-1808).

II. The Central Administration of the VOC in Batavia

1. The High Government (De Hoge Regering) 1609-1811

The High Government which was established in 1609 was composed of the Governor-General and a Council of the Indies (Asia) of which there were (from 1617 onwards) nine members. The task of these nine members was ‘to assist [the Governor-General] in all such matters as the general management of trade, war, government, and in the administration of justice in all civil and criminal matters’.

Complying with the orders issued by the Heren XVII (Gentlemen Seventeen, the Directors of the VOC in the Netherlands), Jan Pietersz. Coen made Jaccatra the seat of the Netherlands Indies Government. Before this Governors-General had resided mostly in Banten or Ternate. Immediately after the capture of Jaccatra on 30 May 1619, the High Government hastened to set itself up in its new land base. In its work it was assisted by the General Secretariat, which was headed by a secretary who attended the sessions of the Council of the Indies and wrote out the resolutions. His right-hand man was the chief clerk who held the rank of chief merchant, and it was also manned by regular clerks and extra-ordinary clerks. In the course of the years the number of clerks rose, from fourteen in 1660 to approximately seventy in 1799. Each of the regular clerks was given one or more specific sections of the administrative duties: keeping the Dagregister van Batavia (the daily journal kept at the Castle), copying the books of resolutions, copying resolutions or minutes, registering incoming letters, and compiling registers and indexes.

The amount of paperwork at the Castle was enormous. A few times a year, for example in the autumn when the return ships left for the Netherlands, the work piled up. Innumerable chests with letters had to be prepared ready to be sent to the Gentlemen Seventeen and the Chambers in the Netherlands. During this extremely busy time, extra-ordinary clerks were employed. This took an enormous workload off the shoulders of the permanent staff of the Secretariat. Not only did the administration of the High Government have to be kept up to date, it was also impossible to overlook the correspondence to the branch offices, the other administrative bodies in Batavia, and various Asian rulers. In order to keep its own organizations in Batavia, the Gentlemen Seventeen, the Chambers, the other factories in Asia, and the urban boards in Batavia informed of the decisions taken by the High Government, multiple copies had to be made of either whole documents or parts thereof and dispatched. In 1735, after a number of inconsistencies had been detected, responsibility for the archive of the High Government was handed over to an archivaris (archivist). Prior to this, this task had been just one extra job to be done by other employees of the Secretariat. The position of archivist was abolished in 1808 by the then incumbent Governor-General Daendels.

The High Government was heavily dependent on the work of a number of top functionaries and managers. Chief among them was the Director-General. He was in charge of logistics and transport, the trade in and shipping of everything connected with the business in Asia. In sessions of the High Government he had to discuss such important matters as the compilation