CHAPTER SEVEN

THE EAST SERAMESE:
TRADERS AND REBELS

The Seramese are a people with whom from the very beginning we have never been able to attain anything by either gentle or harsh means, and they have been correctly described by many of our renowned predecessors as the most wicked and untrustworthy folk ever to have been found under the sun.¹

The relationship between Prince Nuku and the East Seramese was extraordinary. During his fifteen years in exile from Tidore, Waru—on the east part of Seram—was one of the safe hiding-places of the Prince while he pursued his struggle. The role of the East Seramese in the whole gamut of the struggle throughout the course of Prince Nuku’s rebellion was significant. The majority of them were commercially oriented people from prominent negeri with a reputation as centres of trade. Rarakit was one of the big negeri and was considered a centre of trading and raiding networks, because Papuan raiders used to carry their captives and goods there for sale. Among the indigenous inhabitants were also many Bandanese who had fled and settled there after 1621. Big houses and a mosque could be found in Rarakit in the eighteenth century. Even one hundred years earlier, in 1619, there had been plenty of wealthy traders over there.² In the first year of Nuku’s rebellion, in 1780, the inhabitants of Rarakit armed themselves with fine Makassarese guns. Some houses were guarded by four small, heavy swivel guns (rantaka), a little longer than the draaijbas used by the Company. The colonial administration had no idea how these weapons had been obtained. At the arrival of the hongi fleet, the people of Rarakit quickly buried or hid their goods and pieces of artillery and were not prepared to show open resistance because the Dutch hongi fleet carried superior weaponry and was supported by an indigenous fleet. Instead, they chose to disappear temporarily in the forest for safety.³

Between Hote and Rarakit was located Waru, where a great amount of sago was sold. The old Waru settlement had nine compounds. Valentijn stigmatized the inhabitants as ‘wild’ because they invariably refused to join the hongi of the Ambon Government. When a hongi approached the area, all of the inhabitants simply fled into the forest.⁴ Located in between two rivers and protected by reefs, Waru was one of the favourite hiding-places of Prince Nuku. Not far from Rarakit to the south, in Keffing, traders and raiders also met each other at the Pasar Besar (big market),
which was open seven days a week. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the people of Salawati were reported to be selling their slaves, sago, tortoiseshell, ambergris, and spices to Keffing traders. Keffing had four settlements: Kesongat, Kelibon, Kuwaus, and Ernanang. In 1633, it could muster 4,000 fighting men. Even so, in 1659 through the collaboration of one orangkaya of Keffing, the inhabitants were subjected to VOC oppression. One year later the settlement was harassed and destroyed. Just as other East Seramese, the people denigrated as the ‘unruly and perfidious rabble’ of Keffing were also lauded as astute traders. The Makassarese and Bandanese frequently came there to trade and settle. As their part of the commercial network, the Keffing people fostered special trading connections with Onin and Pulau Adi to the east of Onin.

Seram Laut lies to the east of the peninsula on which Keffing is located. Governor Antonio van den Heuvel of Ambon (1634–5) estimated that in 1633 it boasted of having about 3,000 able-bodied men. Around it cluster five small islands, of which Pulau Geser is one. From east to west Seram Laut measures only 3.7 km across and it is 1.5 km long north-south. Because there was no fresh water on this island, it had to be transported from its neighbours. In 1633, Artus Gijssel attacked Seram Laut and arrested most of the orangkaya. Their houses were burned and the spice trees destroyed. The inhabitants were removed to Keffing where they built eleven settlements: Kilwaru, Kiltai, Rumatameri, Keliluhu, Ena, Kelibia, Kilberau, Kelimala, Rumaesi, Rumamaru, and Rumalolas. A hardy breed of intrepid traders, the Seram Laut people worked assiduously to maintain their trading networks. In the 1670s Orangkaya Uwas (Rumatameri) and Uwan (Kilwaru) controlled the massoi and slave trades with Onin, especially with Rumbati and Karas, but were deeply involved with Kobiai as well. On the eastern side of Seram Laut lies one other small but important island: Suruwaki (Panjang), which belongs to the Gorom group of islands. On this island, slaves, the property of the Goromese, used to be kept temporarily before being sold. Papuan raiders also used to hide on these thirteen small islands to the south-east of Seram Laut. Within the Gorom group, there are two other islands: Manawoka and an eponymous island. Gorom and Seram Laut represented two prominent groups in East Seram. As were their counterparts on Seram Laut, the Goromese were very active traders. In 1633 Gorom could muster around 10,000 able-bodied men.

To the west of Geser, on the main island of Seram, there were substantial settlements whose inhabitants were known to be bold and skilful in their commercial dealings. These included the Guli-Guli, Kelibon, Kumilang, Kilmuri, and Werinama as well as the Elpaputi on the western side. In 1633 Gulu-Guli had 2,000 able-bodied men. In 1648, Kelibon