KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER AND CULTURAL APPROPRIATION: GEORG EVERHARD RUMPHIUS’S ‘D’AMBOINSCHE RARITEITKAMER’ (1705)

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Introduction

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) set its mercantile sights on establishing a spice monopoly in the Moluccas. The VOC pushed out the Portuguese and, in 1605, created its first trading post on Ambon, thus laying the foundations for an ever-burgeoning trade in the years to follow.¹ The economic, military, and commercial system centred on Ambon was accompanied by the creation of a knowledge network. The key actor in this network was the VOC official and naturalist Georg Everhard Rumphius (1627–1702), who in the second half of the seventeenth century wrote several large volumes on the natural history of the Moluccas, which were only published after his death.

In the following essay I shall analyse one of these works – *D’Amboinsche Rariteitkamer* (*The Ambonese Curiosity Cabinet*; 1705) [Fig. 1], a description of crustaceans, molluscs and minerals on Ambon and the surrounding islands – in its function as a medium of knowledge transfer. I shall examine the way Rumphius’s descriptions of nature embody symbolic processes of translation and appropriation, occurring not only between cultures but also between materiality and mediality. In doing so, I will draw on the actor-network theory of the French anthropologist of science Bruno Latour. In investigating the mechanisms of knowledge transfer and accumulation in the process of European expansion, Latour showed how interacting political, economic and scientific

Fig. 1. Title page of Georg Everhard Rumphius, *D’Amboinsche Rariteitkamer* (Amsterdam, François Halma: 1705). Göttingen, Göttingen University Library.