Dutch versus Portuguese colonialism.  
Traders versus crusaders?

Karel Steenbrink

The year 1492 was immensely significant in global history. It marked the end of the _Reconquista_, the long process of ending Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula, and also the beginnings of the expansion of European rule over the new territories discovered by Christopher Columbus, first in the Americas and then, after 1498, in Asia. Is there a connection between the two? Or rather, should we consider the Portuguese and Spanish expansion of trade and power into regions of Asia (and also Africa) as a continuation of the _Reconquista_? This idea was encapsulated succinctly by a student of Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje in 1909 in a statement attached to his doctoral dissertation: ‘It has to be regretted, with a view to the permanent global domination of the Caucasian race, that de Albuquerque could not execute his plan to conquer Mecca.’¹ In 1513, the Portuguese admiral and viceroy of the Estado da Índia, Afonso de Albuquerque, attacked Aden as part of an attempt to launch a campaign against Arabia and the holy cities of Islam. He was not successful, and he died soon after in 1515. The idea was never taken up again, but it can be seen as symbolic of the view that Iberian colonial expansion was conceived as a crusade directed against Muslim power, having as its ultimate goal the final annihilation of Islam.

Unlike this expansion from the Iberian Peninsula, which would result in territorial gains (mostly in the Americas) and was motivated by the spirit of the _Reconquista_, it is possible to see the Northern European initiative to Asian countries as being motivated by trade; it was more peaceful, with only economic gain as its direct purpose. In contrast to Iberian expansion, the Northern Europeans were not driven by interests of state, but rather by incentives of profit. In consequence, there were fewer religious references in the first formulations of their intentions.

The difference between the Iberian nations’ strategies and those of the Northern European colonial powers with regard to the idea of the

¹ A translation of thesis IX which is attached to D.A. Rinkes, _Abdoerra’oef van Singkel. Bijdrage tot de kennis der mystiek op Sumatra en Java_, Heerenveen, 1909.
Indian Ocean as a ‘Muslim Mediterranean’ further accentuates this contrast. Details of this difference will be discussed below by comparing the approaches and policies adopted by the Portuguese with those followed by the Dutch, examining the difference and questioning whether it is absolute.

From Tiele to Schrieke. The legacy of Albuquerque in Dutch discussions

Pieter Anton Tiele (1834-89) is prominent in Dutch colonial history as a researcher and publisher. As librarian of the universities of Leiden and Utrecht, he established a new standard for cataloguing, and between 1877 and 1887 he wrote a series of substantial articles on the arrival of Europeans in the Malay Archipelago. He then initiated a series of publications on the colonial history of the Dutch in the East Indies. In a popular literary magazine he wrote a long essay on Afonso de Albuquerque as the architect of Portuguese colonialism in the Asian territories. He observed that Muslim traders in these southern and eastern regions lived among the population, while the Portuguese built fortifications in a drive to eliminate Muslim trade from the Indian Ocean. This was an attempt to extend the Iberian *Reconquista*. The *feitoria* system did indeed make the development of European colonialism possible, and it was adopted by the Dutch. Albuquerque was highly ambitious and hatched some impossible plans. One was to divert the course of the Nile to the south-east in order to destroy the viability of Muslim Egypt. Another was to steal the body of Muḥammad from Mecca (in ignorance of the fact that he was buried in Medina), with the idea of then ransoming it in exchange for Christian rule over Jerusalem. Albuquerque even contemplated burning the entire city of Mecca to the ground, but did not manage much more than a failed siege of Aden. He managed to take Malacca in 1511

---

