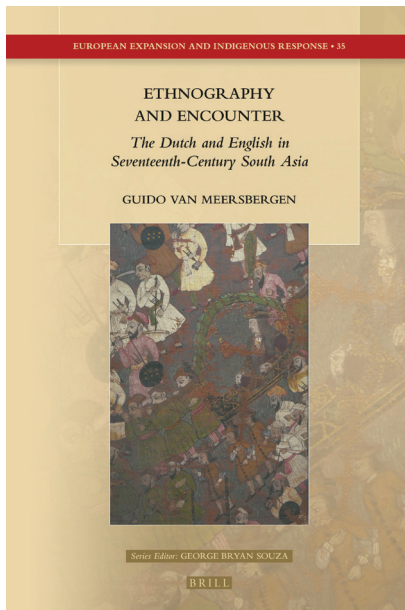


## Review

Guido van Meersbergen, *Ethnography and Encounter. The Dutch and English in Seventeenth-Century South Asia*, Leiden, Brill, 2022, 316 pp. ISBN 9789004471825.



*Ethnography and Encounter* is one of the most stimulating and far-ranging books focused on the Dutch and English East India Companies to appear in recent years. It is a capacious study that challenges our view of the companies and their agents in early modern Asia. This expansive nature stems, first, from the fact that it examines both the English East India Company (EIC) and its Dutch competitor, the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische compagnie* (VOC). While this framing was once relatively common, it has long since receded, but Van Meersbergen shows the value of looking at both of these organizations together. Second, the book adopts an extended timeline that considers the discursive frameworks that predated the European encounter with Asia. These deeply-rooted ethnographic conventions included a dichotomy between civility and barbarism, notions of absolute rule, and humouralism which ‘underpinned the belief

that one could reliably define a people’s “nature” (59). These frameworks were then redeployed as Europeans ventured outwards at the end of the sixteenth century. And, third, *Ethnography and Encounter* looks broadly across South Asia with chapters examining Surat, the English Company in Madras, and the VOC in Ceylon.

Across this wide-ranging series of topics, *Ethnography and Encounter* makes four key contributions. First, it stages a powerful assault on the dated idea of Dutch or English merchants as enterprising, rational Protestant traders interested exclusively in trade, who pursued a consistently steady and moderate policy. Instead, Van Meersbergen shows how such officials were trapped within long-standing conventions and rushed to use violence grounded mainly in imagined ‘ethnographic insight’ (121). Throughout the book, he demonstrates again and again how invented ‘ideas about and understandings of Asian people and societies’ drove anxieties, policies, and actions (2).

Second, Van Meersbergen navigates deftly through a debate about representation and projection, that is whether Europeans constructed an entirely imagined version of Asia. Van Meersbergen shows Europeans creating ‘subtly shaded portrayals that were not simply imagined, yet that were never strictly empirical either’ (93). While the conclusion may seem self-evident, it requires significant research to make a persuasive case for it.

Third, Van Meersbergen provides a valuable survey of the companies’ institutional writing cultures. Anyone who has engaged with multiple VOC reports of Asian societies will recognize a clear link between them, but so often specialists – including myself – use these for information without properly understanding the origins and boundaries of the genre. The VOC, for example, provided detailed templates for reports and point-by-point instructions for its subordinates on what it wanted to know including whether the Asian populations were ‘cruel or friendly, faithful or unfaithful’ (80).

Fourth, Van Meersbergen shows how ethnographic assumptions played out on the ground across South Asia. As above, they could translate into a rush to violence because force was perceived as the only response to supposed Asian duplicity but the picture was always more complex than this. Ethnographic assumptions were powerful but accommodation was always possible. Distrust could co-exist with relatively smooth interactions, compromise, and agreement. This is a sophisticated and persuasive analysis, reading interactions across multiple levels and showing how negative stereotypes made conflict more likely but not inevitable. Citing Francesca Trivellato’s groundbreaking work on trade relations between Sephardic Jews, Christian, and Hindu merchants, Van Meersbergen shows how negative images did not necessarily prevent ‘profitable and even intimate cross-cultural partnerships’ (118).

Each one of these contributions is substantial and together they turn this book into an important work. There are of course some weaknesses. *Ethnography and Encounter* moves quickly and it frames the terrain rather than engaging deeply with case studies of individual officials. It raises an obvious question never fully answered, namely, with negative ethnographic stereotypes looming always in the background, which VOC or EIC agents were more able to overcome ‘barriers to trust’ (138) than others. In my own research, the most dangerous VOC agent was always the credentialled newcomer arriving in Asia determined to prove his worth. The starkest example of this was Pieter Nuyts, first ambassador to Japan and then VOC governor on Taiwan, who created conflict wherever he went. It would have been fascinating to see an examination of how background, time in Asia, or other factors enabled officials to overcome the negative images that permeated corporate writing and thinking. It would have been even more illuminating to consider ‘ethnic stereotypes’ on the other side of the encounter (118). In my own field of early modern Japan, Ron Toby has traced the development of the Tokugawa period imaginary of the other, showing how it was ‘productive and generative of discourses that shaped ideological and political debate’ for decades and centuries to come (348).<sup>1</sup> Such arguments align closely with *Ethnography and Encounter* and, although a huge task for an already ambitious study, looking at both sides would have been highly productive.

1 Ronald P. Toby, *Engaging the Other. ‘Japan’ and Its Alter Egos, 1550-1850* (Leiden 2019).

Finally, the VOC sections of the book often seem more developed than the analysis of the English East India Company, particularly when it comes to the companies' writing traditions. And other sections, brilliant though they are, do not fit quite so neatly with the thrust of the argument. Part three on diplomacy, for example, though it offers a superb, sophisticated analysis of European integration into Mughal court ceremonies, feels a little jarring after the first four chapters have walked the reader through some of the darker recesses of the European cultural imagination.

These are, however, small points; Van Meersbergen has produced an innovative, intriguing, and much-needed study of the cultural assumptions and stereotypes that Europeans brought with them to Asia and which were always influential if never entirely determinative. *Ethnography and Encounter* is clearly worth reading (and teaching with) and it provides a new way to think about the Dutch and English encounter with seventeenth-century Asia.

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