

"Response" to van Fraassen's Review of *The World of Maluku*

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A reply to a review can stimulate important debate, if the review is thoughtful and therefore encourages a further assessment of a particular subject. In this case, however, I am unable to respond in the manner I would have preferred because Dr. van Fraassen's review has not even begun to address the central concerns of the book. Instead, he focuses on a few isolated "mistakes" to "prove" that *The World of Maluku* is a sloppy work of scholarship. This is a serious charge impugning my ability to read and interpret sources which have been the basis of all my previous publications for the last twenty years. Though I would have liked to address important issues that the book raises, I am afraid the thrust and tone of van Fraassen's review leaves me no choice but to confront these charges.

Van Fraassen's accusation of shoddy scholarship rests on his belief that I did not consult certain sources and misread those that I did. It is apparent that he has not in any way been attentive to the historiographical problems and limitations which I have tried to address in my Introduction. It was my stated decision to rely as far as possible on records contemporaneous with the period under discussion. To suggest that I should have consulted works of a later period for this conceptual framework would have been contrary to the methodology which I was applying. This is the reason that Naidah's work and the *Hikayat Ternate* did not figure in the reconstruction of the conceptual framework of the Malukans in the early modern period. Both were consulted but were not listed in the bibliography because I included only those works cited in the text itself.

In regard to van Fraassen's implied accusation that I had neither knowledge nor understanding of the indigenous conceptual framework, I can only refer him once again to the Introduction. I made it clear to the reader that I was aware of the historiographical problems involved in reconstructing an "indigenous" viewpoint, but was willing to take that risk based on a careful reading of the sources (pp. 7-8). What I wished to avoid was precisely the path which van Fraassen would have wished me to take: that is, to consult "European sources in which the Moluccan conceptual framework is described and analyzed." No doubt what van Fraassen had in mind is reconstructions, including his own, based on material of a later period than the centuries under study. Though of course aware of these reconstructions, I found them to be unsatisfactory because they did not reflect the societies being described in the contemporary sources.

The charge that the section on the European World "is essentially a synopsis of a few popular books on the subject" is not only inaccurate but demonstrates a gross misunderstanding of the whole enterprise of historical research. Because I was venturing into a new field, I relied on advice from historians of Medieval Europe and sought to select those sources which would best capture the sense of the early modern European world. What van Fraassen disparagingly refers to as a "synopsis" is in fact a synthesis of expert opinions on the subject. In the section on the World of the European, I discuss some of the shared beliefs based on the Classical and Christian traditions, but also highlight the distinct national pre-occupations of the Portuguese, Spaniards, and the Dutch. It is precisely because of van Fraassen's curt dismissal of this discussion that he makes what can only be termed uninformed remarks concerning European alliances with indigenous realms.

In a similar fashion van Fraassen accuses me of an "uncritical use of a theoretical framework developed by anthropologists," yet fails to mention what he found to be uncritical

about my use of the framework. Since the disciplines of anthropology and history have had an especially fruitful relationship in the study of Southeast Asian history in general and eastern Indonesia in particular, it would have been more constructive if van Fraassen had tried to advance the field by contributing his ideas to the debate.

The remainder of the review is a random attack on various statements made in the book in an attempt to demonstrate my misreading of the sources. Van Fraassen first questions my interpretation of certain Malukan and Malay terms. It basically comes down to a choice between his interpretation and mine. I have adequately footnoted in my book the sources for my definitions of Malukan terms, and I see no reason to accept his arguments over my own. Insofar as the definition of the Malay word *guna* is concerned, I would like to cite R. J. Wilkinson, a well-known scholar of classical Malay literature. He traces the word to its Sanskrit meaning of "the virtue in anything." He then offers two senses of the word in Malay, the first and the most important of which is "magical potency."¹ This "magical potency" is precisely the connotation I wished to convey in selecting "fortune" as the closest equivalent in English. Words such as *guna* with strong suggestions of spiritual/magical potency are not peculiar to the archipelago but are also found in mainland Southeast Asia and in the Pacific (p. 51).

Van Fraassen then attempts to "prove" my misuse of the sources by quoting an abstract from Galvao's *Treatise* and my rendering of it. I fail to see where I have misused the information. In my analysis of both the *Treatise* and contemporary European records, I have attempted to contextualize the material and to interpret it within this context. Van Fraassen's simplistic approach to historical sources is not only evident in the examples he quotes in the review; it is also glaringly apparent in the superficial and unreflective historical reconstruction found in his PhD dissertation, cited by him to counter my representation of Maluku's past.

An example of van Fraassen's inability to understand statements made in this study is his attack on my claim that Islam provided an important basis for royal authority in Maluku. To refute this argument he cites the case of Minangkabau and Polynesian societies which he says had "strong" royal authority without Islam. But my view is that Islam, while perhaps the most important, was only one of several factors contributing to royal authority in Maluku; I by no means argue that Islam was essential for *strong* royal authority. Anyone with a knowledge of the historical development of Islam in the archipelago would have found little controversial in my observation of Islam's significant role in the evolution of royal authority in the region.²

Van Fraassen's very selective reading of my book is disturbing and raises doubts as to whether he really attempted to assess the study on its own terms. The most obvious example is his statement that I have uncritically used Valentijn in seeing the Fala Raha (Four Houses) as leaders in Ternate's early expansion. He then "corrects" my observation made on page 83 to say that in actual fact only two of the houses were involved. Yet only a page later I do make that qualification, and trace the evolution of the involvement of the Tomagola and Tomaitu families. Were I to follow the logic adopted in van Fraassen's review, I could also ungenerously point to his misreading or oversight as an example of "uncritical and sloppy scholarship."

¹ R. J. Wilkinson, *A Malay-English Dictionary (Romanised)*. Part 1 (A-K) (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 380.

² See for example A. C. Milner, "Islam and Malay Kingship," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1981): 46-70; and M. C. Ricklefs, "Six Centuries of Islamization in Java," in *Conversion to Islam*, ed. Nehemia Levtzion (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1979).

It is unfortunate that van Fraassen ignored the major issues of *The World of Maluku* and focused his attention on isolated points in an effort to discredit the book's historicity. As an ethnographer, he may have not been comfortable commenting on the historiographical problems raised, but the growing dialogue between historians and anthropologists, especially in Southeast Asian studies, should have evoked some comment on my particular approach. It is difficult to explain his failure to discuss my ideas of duality, center-periphery relations, and the interplay of European and Malukan conceptions of time and events. He seems content simply to state his disagreement.

For example, van Fraassen confidently asserts that I have not demonstrated the existence of two distinct European and Malukan ideas of time and progress. Yet the whole of Part 2 is a record of the interaction of these two differing conceptions, a distinction discussed in the Introduction and reflected in my deliberate choice of chapter headings. Concerns for the maintenance of the duality between Ternate and Tidore, and Nuku's ability to sustain a long and successful rebellion by appealing to a "restoration," are all part of the Malukan cyclical view of time which began with the destruction of Jailolo in the early sixteenth century and culminated with the rise of Nuku in the late eighteenth century.

Only on one occasion does van Fraassen raise the issue of center-periphery relationships, but merely to reject my conclusions out of hand with no further discussion. He simply questions my statement that "the nature of the exchange of products and services for prestige goods and spiritual blessings was in no way regarded as an unequal and oppressive arrangement" (p. 112). In 1993 a work was published which appeared too late to be incorporated in my own study. It demonstrates that my characterization of center-periphery relations in Maluku in the early modern period is common to many societies. In *Craft and the Kingly Idea*, Mary W. Helms describes relationships between the "superordinate center" (such as Ternate and Tidore) and the "acquisitional societies" (or the periphery), in which the material and symbolic values of objects are interwoven into a mutually beneficial arrangement. The former extends its cultural artifacts, titles, dress, etc. to the latter as a way of reinforcing its centrality; whereas the latter acquires these objects from the former in order to establish its own political-ideological programs in relation to its "periphery."³ The central argument advanced is that indigenous conceptual frameworks involving cosmological structures and politically significant acts of transformation encourage the combining of economic and symbolic activities into a single cultural explanation.⁴ The cases of center-periphery relationships I describe in my study are clear examples of Helms' postulation, which itself is based on a number of ethnographies.

I have attempted to answer van Fraassen's criticism point by point because I feel that it is a serious matter to accuse any academic of "uncritical and sloppy" scholarship. During the past two decades I believe I have demonstrated sufficient care in my research and writing to be regarded as a reputable historian. I believe that it is the responsibility of the historian not only to offer a reconstruction of the past but to suggest ways in which the past can be more effectively explored and better understood. It is to these problems that I addressed my book. All I can hope is that those who read my work will be excited by some of its findings and be stimulated to extend the academic inquiry in a positive manner.

³ Mary W. Helms, *Craft and the Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade, and Power* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), ch. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.