BY THE NUMBERS: MAKASSAR'S TRADE, CENTRALIZED STATISTICS AND LOCAL REALITIES[1]

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ABSTRACT

The valuable trade statistics provided by the Netherlands Indies government are a boon to researchers, but should not be accepted at face value. The extent to which shippers avoided registration is indicated by a comparison of Makassar's trade figures before and after it was made a free-port in 1847, while early twentieth-century data from Makassar itself show a significantly higher level of maritime traffic than Batavia's do. This suggests that central statistical series can seriously misrepresent local trade.

Keywords: Makassar's trade, Statistics, VOC

> *"As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns - the ones we don't know we don't know...it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones."*
>
> *Donald Rumsfeld, U.S. Department of Defence briefing, 12 February2002*

INTRODUCTION

Innumerate historians such as myself are deeply grateful to scholars like Anne Booth who combine a mastery of economic theory and quantitative sources with a clear understanding of the weight of the past. Statistical series enable historians to trace underlying processes over time. But, alas, few such sources exist, and all – but particularly the older ones - are marked by the limited reach, specific aims and variable categorizations of their compilers. While new publications, such as the *Changing Economy of Indonesia* volumes, have

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helped make this tangled treasure trove of colonial statistics more accessible, regions with little documentation run the risk of being marginalized. It was only the publication of Edward Poelinggomang's work, with its trade and shipping figures, which allowed Anne Booth to include Makassar in her account of nineteenth-century economic growth outside Java (Booth 1998: 25-9; Poelinggomang 1993).

My purpose in this contribution is to explore some of the problems that arise when we begin to extract numbers from self-referring diachronic sources, and instead try to use them to describe actual local economies. My examples are drawn from the trade of Makassar, a vital East Indies port, from the 1700s to 1918. Although Makassar included a Dutch East India Company (VOC, 1602-1796) garrison settlement from 1669, the Southwest Sulawesi peninsula itself was only fully colonized after 1906. Documents and data produced by officials in this (proto-) colonial outpost of Dutch bureaucracy depicted not the world within which they operated, but those aspects of it that were within their political and managerial reach. Although the gap between paper and human realities might have been particularly wide in Makassar's case, I believe that they are illustrative of a much more general divergence that should be born in mind by anyone working on Western sources, particularly statistics. So in this piece I am more concerned with the information that is NOT there, than with the data provided.

STATISTICS IN THE DUTCH INDIES

Both the VOC and its successor, the Netherlands Indies government, tried to control and exploit trade, directing it towards their Batavia headquarters. But a strong trading tradition linked harbours with each other across the South China and Java seas and the more eastern Sulu, Sulawesi and Banda waters. The extensive archipelago was also open to penetration by outsiders, particularly the British. Batavia was unable to control evasion of customs regimes so the data it received ware partial at best.

As a transnational trading venture the VOC paid careful attention to its accounts, managed by the Bookkeeper-General,[2] and compiled endless lists on matters such as shipping. For the Company, information, like its maps,

[2] These accounts, covering 18,000 voyages and 250,000 commodity descriptions were digitalized.

was a commercial asset to be kept secret. The VOC archives are now an unrivalled source on early modern Indonesia. Gerrit Knaap and myself used the harbourmaster's registers of Makassar's eighteenth-century shipping and cargoes to examine sea-borne commerce, experiencing for ourselves the potential and problems of such material (Knaap and Sutherland 2004: 272). The registers enabled us to see patterns which would have been invisible to contemporaries, even to the officials who compiled them. Existing assumptions about the decline of trade under the VOC were modified, while the impact of Chinese commerce in Eastern Indonesia became clearer. Yet we were always aware of the limitations of the data, distortions created by fluctuating policies and levels of political control, shifts in supply and demand, as well as more local issues of competence and corruption.

It was only at the end of the 1700s that a more scientific appreciation of the public use of statistics began to emerge. This was exemplified for Java by early nineteenth-century administrators, particularly the Napoleonic Daendels (1807-1810) and British Raffles (1811-1816). The reforming Governor-General Van der Capellen (1818-1826) was very aware of the need for reliable data. Annual residency reports, now in the Jakarta archives, date from his period, as do the first published trade lists, on Java and Madura. A separate series for the Outer Islands followed (Verslag van den handel 1825-1871; Overzigt 1846-1869). Further statistical exercises in Java were intended to facilitate the land tax (*landrente),* but also exposed the inadequacy of existing data and collection methods. In the case of the trade statistics, the primary purpose was to document customs revenue, as the government was concerned that Singapore, founded by the British in 1819, was becoming too central to Indies shipping (Van de Graaff 1955: 97-8; Singgih 2003). After the Dutch constitutional reforms of 1848 parliament received an annual report on the colonies, which became a subject of political debate. The *Koloniaal Verslag* (Colonial Report), and its successor *Indisch Verslag* (The Indies Report), published detailed statistics from 1849 to the Second World War (Verslag van het beheer 1849-1866; KoloniaalVerslag 1867-1923; Statistisch jaaroverzicht 1923-1930; Indisch Verslag 1931-1940). Data on the colonies were also incorporated into the Netherlands' economic annual reports.[3]

[3] See http://archive.org/stream/staatkundigenst03unkngoog/staatkundigenst03unkngoog_djvu. txt

Reliance on early figures can lead to gross misinterpretations, particularly because numerical data seem so concrete and convincing that they give researchers a false sense of security. It was not until the late nineteenth century, as political control advanced, that numbers for the main colonial centres became less unreliable. As the central bureaucracy developed, different departments issued own data of their own, using varying categorizations and creating confusion (Statistiek van den handel 1870-1906; Statistiek van den handel, de scheepvaart (1871-1875). From 1874 the distinction between Java and the Outer Islands was dropped, and with it the detailed information on each administrative region's inter-insular traffic in various commodities. Only the trade between the Netherlands Indies and overseas was included. However, in 1879 imports and exports by private enterprise were again listed by province (Van den Berg 1907: 348-9). In 1892 a Central Office for Statistics was established in another attempt to impose order on the muddle. In 1907 Java and Madura were again separated from the Outer Islands, and in 1910 shipping became a separate series.

The need for international standardization was increasingly clear, but the Indies data were inadequately organized, as different levels or regions of shipping activity were included or excluded, and commodity categorizations varied. After 1912 an important change in trade data presentation exposed commercial sectors that had previously been unrecorded. Prior to this only traffic between different provinces and the first and last ports-of-call for steamships had been noted, but after 1912 intra-provincial shipping and packet-ships intermediate visits were also listed (Touwen 2002). The results were particularly revealing for transit ports like Makassar, a staple place for products brought in by coastal vessels (including a strong fleet of trading *perahu*) to await the KPM packets or foreign ships. In 1918 a new Instruction for the Compilation of Statistics for Trade and Customs was issued, but the resulting commodity name list was still unsatisfactory and was revised in 1925.Goods exceeding 1,000 guilders in value were divided into 16 aggregate categories. This standard was applied to Java from 1926 and the Outer Islands from 1928 (Clemens, Lindblad and Touwen 1992), and remained in force until the beginning of 1948.

Two simple points emerge from this brief review of statistical history: firstly, there is an impressive amount of material, and secondly, the process of compilation has always been problematic, even for those working at the higher levels of abstraction. This was even more apparent at the other end of the data

gathering process. The situation of local Dutch officials was complicated in very different ways. They struggled to reconcile Batavia's demands for clarity with their often precarious political role and consequent limited access to reliable information. In outposts like Makassar this was very clear. The desire in particular to enforce a general Dutch customs zone, eliminating competition by independent regional ports, led to colonial rule after 1906.

MAKASSAR'S TRADE

During Makassar's long history commodity flows adjusted to take advantage of changing demand and supply conditions, access to capital, and technology. In the seventeenth century rice and slave exports predominated, while Indian textile imports were central. The court and its foreign merchant allies exploited the most profitable routes. By the mid-eighteenth century, however, Makassar had become a hub in the South China Sea trade. It was the essential entrepot, clearing house and processor for maritime commodities (particularly tripang) shipped from the south-eastern Indonesian islands to China. From 1746 until the 1820s exchange was dominated by the Amoy junk, with lesser connections to Canton and Macau. Chinese traders flourished and the VOC, quite outside the system, benefited from taxes. In theory, all voyages to the west of Batavia were prohibited. Yet a significant traffic continued to link Makassar with the Malacca Straits in defiance of Company rules; this trade is almost invisible in Dutch sources. The entrepreneurial Wajorese, alongside Mandarese and other Buginese played a key role, shipping textiles (Sutherland and Bree 1987), and products such as gambir, an ingredient in the widely-chewed betel-nut preparation *sirih*.

Makassar's Asian-led commercial boom continued through the 1780s. Tripang and rattan passed through en route to Amoy, slaves were sent to Batavia, money and Chinese commodities to Nusa Tenggara Barat and Timur. Java supplied arak, tobacco, and Indian textiles, while Sumbawa provided rice and raw cotton. The latter was also, along with Bonerate and Buton, a general rendezvous for the trepan fleets working the waters from the Flores Sea to the Sulawesi coast, and along the shores of Australia and Papua. Chinese and Malay merchants flourished, but the predominantly mestizo Europeans had to rely on supplying slaves to Batavia. Sulawesians were prominent in the southern seas. After making some rather heroic assumptions, Gerrit Knaap and myself concluded that trade over the entire period trade grew by 2.1 per

cent, with a compound growth rate of ca.4 per cent after 1770 (Knaap and Sutherland 2004). This vigorous Asian economy contrasted with the political and economic decline of the Company in South Sulawesi, as Bone asserted its control over much of the peninsula, choking Dutch Makassar's access to slaves and rice (Jacobs 2006).

The increasingly peripheral role of the Dutch in Makassar was confirmed by the shift of East Indonesian trade to Singapore. Sea and forest products, and later agricultural commodities destined for China and Europe, were shipped there in exchange for textiles, opium and weapons. From the late 1830s coffee, promoted by local rulers and Dutch officials, proved a valuable and ultimately dominant commodity. Much was exported by the semi-official Netherlands Trading Association (NHM, Nederlandsche Handel-Maatschappij), but about one-third of the coffee harvest left directly from 'native' ports, by-passing Makassar.[4] In an effort to break these Singapore-centered networks, Makassar was made a (partially) free port in 1847 (Poelinggomang 2002). Dutch commercial institutions, private German and Dutch merchants opened offices in Makassar, focused on trade with Europe. The main exports were still coffee and tripang and forest products, while the chief imports were textiles, opium and yarns.

The Netherlands sought 'to impose a narrow bilateralism' on the Indies (Dick 1990: 296), with trade and shipping concentrated in Dutch hands and on Dutch ports, particularly Batavia. These efforts were strengthened by steam shipping, particularly the formation of the KPM (Koninklijke Paketvaart Maatschappij, Royal Packet Company) line (1888-1966) and, around the turn of the century, by direct shipping to the West. There was then a growing European interest in sea and forest products such as latex, rattan, pearls, mother-of-pearl, ebony and bird skins. At the end of the 1800s coffee was the dominant export, although copra was emerging. Textiles and opium were the chief imports. Within twenty years, however, copra had become the backbone of Makassar's exports, and non-textile manufactures made up a significant proportion of imports. By then Makassar's long-distance trade was integrated into the commercial networks of the mature colonial economy, while maintaining less visible, but crucial ties with Singapore, Hong Kong and Southern China.

[4] ANRI, Jakarta: Makassar. Vol. 7/7, 9/4. See Appendix, Trade.

CONTEXTUALIZING MAKASSAR'S TRADE STATISTICS

The archives in Jakarta, Makassar and The Hague contain many statistical fragments. But the data on Makassar are so scattered and variable, and give such a partial view of the processes described, that it is useless for large-scale analysis. Yet it is very valuable, if it can be critically contextualised, which is not always easy. To illustrate this I will give several examples of how the statistics recording Makassar's trade were shaped by political realities, government policy and/or changes in collecting procedures. Often varying sets of data were kept by separate officials for different purposes, and a large proportion of Makassar's traffic was either completely unrecorded or noted by local power-holders who kept no archives.

The VOC only had the legal right to control the trade of its own subjects[5], and could not interfere with people under other jurisdictions, such as those of local rulers. Moreover, since the Dutch harbourmaster did not tax vessels under c.2 tons, and since local coastal traffic (including hubs like Bira and Bonerate) was generally exempt, his brief only covered interregional trade by Dutch subjects. It is estimated that even in this sector c. 20 per cent trade was unreported (Knaap and Sutherland 2004: 8).

The king of powerful Bone was a crucial ally of the Dutch. He spent a couple of months a year at his court at Bontoala, just east of the city, and controlled much of the densely settled Makassar area. The Bugis kampung north of the fort included the quarter of the famously entrepreneurial Wajorese and the vigorous Bugis market. The Dutch had to accept their exclusion from these settlements for political reasons. Trading centres further north, like Mandar and Kaili, were also free of VOC control. Since the VOC anchorage enforced higher charges, the Bugis market was preferred by many traders, and consequently the most valuable imports, Indian textiles, were cheaper in Makassar than Batavia, which severely limited VOC imports into Makassar.

In 1767 the Company's harbourmaster at Makassar carried out an official enquiry into the 'present condition of trade, not only insofar as it concerns the small number of our inhabitants, but all the principle places of commerce in this Government'. He sought the true cause of the collapse of our sales,

[5] These included immigrant communities like Chinese and Malays, and *kampung* inhabitants not under independent lords.

and why it is that the native can obtain English goods[6] in better quality and for a lower price than the Company is able to deliver, as well as to why native woven goods are preferred to those which the Company brings'. His report describes *perahu* from Wajo and Mandar (both regions with a strong weaving tradition) carrying local textiles to Riau, at the strategic southern end of the Malacca Straits, where they were sold for Spanish dollars. These they took north, to the Malay sultanates of Kedah and Selangor, where the coins were more valuable. They then purchased 'English' cloth for sale in Sulawesi and further east. Wajorese and Mandarese were also doing brisk business with the Anglo-American country traders from India who sought sea and forest products to exchange for tea in China. They frequented the coasts of Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Sulu (Warren 1981).[7] It is highly probable that some inhabitants of Makassar participated in this trade. Just up the coast from Makassar, for example, the settlement of Soreang was linked by pack-horse trails to the inland lakes, and from there, by the Cenrana river, to the East Coast harbours (Poelinggomang 2002: 136-8; Knaap and Sutherland 2004:20). In reality the VOC only controlled traffic between their main settlements, particularly those in Java and in Maluku.

During the second half of the eighteenth century the VOC harbourmaster was not the only person monitoring Makassar's trade. The revenue-farmer, who paid an annual sum to the Company for the right to collect customs duties, was also losing income because of the Bugis trade. He reached an accommodation with the Bone ruler in 1774, paying him for the right to tax shipping in his areas, and accepted a Bugis 'assistant' for customs collection in Makassar. There were then three officials extracting income from the harbour, and at least the farmer and the harbourmaster kept books. The apparently meticulous Dutch records have survived in part, but only fragments from the farmer's administration. The two sets of accounts 'barely correlate', partly because of different collection methods and payment calculations (Sutherland and Bree 1987; Knaap and Sutherland 2004: 30-6).

6 This refers to products of British India, such as textiles and opium.

7 Nationaal Archief, The Hague: VOC. Vol. 3243, ff.73-81.

MAKASSAR AS A FREE PORT: A BOOM IN TRADE AND STATISTICS

As was noted above, Makassar was made a (semi-) free port in 1847, and the trade statistics were duly transformed. Commodity flows which had been bypassing the port became more visible. Although the supply of many products fluctuated naturally, it is nonetheless clear that between 1846 and 1847 trade boomed. Traders' calculations were determined by a number of factors, and for most *perahu* captains the balance shifted in favour of Makassar. The avoidance of the risks of the sea passage and easy access to cargoes were no longer outweighed by harbour costs. The port had always been particularly convenient for the *perahu* skippers of Eastern Indonesia, and Chinese merchants there were experts in assessing products like *tripang*. However, for commodities from west of the Malacca Straits, such as textiles and opium, Singapore was cheaper.

Between 1846 and 1847 Western textile imports rose almost tenfold, Western yarn imports increased sevenfold, whereas Western textile exports more than doubled in value (Table 1). Textile arrivals from Eastern Indonesia almost doubled as well with exports rising to three times the level in the preceding year. Opium traffic trebled, mother-of-pearl imports and exports increased at extreme rates; other marine commodities followed suit, though less dramatically. Tortoiseshell and *tripang* imports rose threefold and by about 50 per cent respectively, exports fivefold and by more than 150 per cent. Rice imports fell by about 20 per cent, while exports climbed to six times the level that had prevailed in 1846. The overall change in registered commodities between the years 1846 and 1847 amounted to 145 per cent among imports and 123 per cent among exports. The increase in the value of total registered trade between the years 1847 and 1848 was far less impressive on both accounts.

Table 1
Makassar's Trade in Selected Commodities, 1846-1848.
(value in guilders)

Products	Imports			Exports		
	1846	1847	1848	1846	1847	1848
Coins	191	198	99	243	131	185
Coffee beans	29	71	76	12	137	68
Mother-of-pearl	5	100	88	5	96	113
Opium	55	185	188	58	155	185
Rice	100	80	55	21	134	108
Textiles (Indonesian)	44	86	128	36	107	178
Textiles (Indian)	6	13	172	16	16	27
Textiles (Western)	76	721	755	75	179	251
Tortoiseshell	18	53	44	23	106	115
Tripang	112	155	209	102	248	238
Yarns (Western)	17	118	123	-	-	-
Total (selected)	655	1,780	1,938	591	1,309	1,289
	(**60%**)	(**67%**)	(**67%**)	(**68%**)	(**68%**)	(**61%**)
Total	1,084	2,659	2,885	868	1,933	2,104
(registered)	(**100**)	(**245**)	(**266**)	(**100**)	(**223**)	(**242**)

Source: Overzigt 1846-1849: report on 1848.

Notes: Total selected commodities in value (thousand guilders) and as a percentage of all registered commodities. Total registered commodities in value (thousand guilders) and as a percentage of the 1846 level (1846=100).

Source: Overzigt 1846-1849: report on 1848.

Notes: Total selected commodities in value (thousand guilders) and as a percentage of all registered commodities. Total registered commodities in value (thousand guilders) and as a percentage of the 1846 level (1846=100).

The impact of the 1847 opening of Makassar created a corresponding drop in Singapore's trade with Sulawesi between the 1845/46 and 1846/47 seasons, declining in value from 1,002,080 to 604,866 Spanish dollars, a loss of around 40 per cent. The number of *perahu* sailing to the British port declined, and never recovered. But the increase in square-rigged shipping between the two ports compensated for this loss, and the sixteen years after 1847 formed the peak years for Singapore-Sulawesi trade, before Singapore's economic crisis of the early1860s (Wong 1960: 102-5, Table IX: 22). Meanwhile, Makassar

became the clearing house for the *perahu* traffic (Wong 1960: 222).In terms of ships large enough to be counted, Singapore was a more important trading partner for Sulawesi, particularly for the independent states, than was Makassar. Much of the coastal and regional traffic evaded Dutch controls (Poelinggomang 2002: 145-7). Indeed, it has been estimated that colonial officials failed to register about two-thirds of goods traded in Makassar around 1840 (Dick *et al.* 2002: 94-5).

CENTRAL VERSUS LOCAL STATISTICS

The figures for Makassar's mid-nineteenth century trade by Batavia in the *Overzigt* and the port's own harbour administration generally agree, although the latter are often higher. This was the case, for example, in 1860 when local import and export data were respectively 11 and 22 per cent higher (Table 2). But problems generally arose within, rather than between, sources. However, as more data becomes available, inconsistencies emerge.

Table 2
Comparison of Central and Local Registration of Makassar's Trade, 1854-1860. (value in thousand guilders, percentage = local registration as a proportion of central registration)

Year	*Overzigt* Imports	Exports	1860 Annual report Makassar Imports	%	Exports	%
1856	4,473	4,066	4,517	101	4,240	104
1857	4,013	4,097	4,498	112	4,530	111
1858	4,199	4,016	4,968	118	5,241	131
1859	5,740	5,709	6,347	111	6,714	118
1860	7,870	5,067	8,736	111	6,162	122

Sources: Overzigt 1856-1860, as given in Poelinggomang 2002. Annual reports on Makassar's trade in: ANRI, Jakarta: Makassar. Vol. 9/1.

If we juxtapose import and export figures from Batavia (to 1908) and Makassar (from 1910), there appears to be a very sudden jump in reported trade between the two years (Tables 3 and 4). This is somewhat unexpected, as the free-port status of Makassar was abolished in July 1906, and the considerable growth in Makassar's trade was usually attributed to its free port status ('Makassar'

1879). The *Overzigt* figures do show an increase by 1908, but the difference in scale between these numbers and the local data from 1910 is considerable, as is the continuing gap between the harbourmaster's statistics and those given by Cool (1911-1918), using Batavia's data (Cool 1921).

Table 3
Makassar's Trade as Reported by the Government, 1895-1908. (value in thousand guilders)

Year	Imports	Exports
1895	5,668	5,779
1900	4,292	9,282
1903	4,313	8,630
1905	4,168	9,651
1906	6,458	10,261
1907	5,515	10,533
1908	6,476	10,914

Sources: Koloniaal Verslag 1895-1908: Vol. II.Poelinggomang 2002.

Table 4
Imports and Exports of Makassar as Reported in Various Sources, 1910-1918 (value in thousand guilders)

Year	Harbour		Cool		*Encyclopaedia*	
	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports	Imports	Exports
1910	15,583	35,658				
1911	17,060	34,618	8,229	18,341		
1912	18,687	33,348	11,116	15,697		
1913	24,650	34,704	18,905	15,712	14,157	18,635
1914	20,709	33,695	10,615	17,003		
1915	17,239	27,161	10,355	15,415		
1916	14,765	25,092	9,039	12,563		
1917	17,225	20,115	16,827	13,420		
1918	18,225	15,810	11,933	8,438		

Sources: Jaarverslag Haven 1925; Cool 1921; Encyclopaedia 1918: 'Makassar'.

The authoritative Netherlands Indies *Encyclopaedia*, which drew its material from the 'Statistisch jaaroverzicht' in the *Koloniaal Verslag* over 1905, and agrees with Poelinggomang, gives different 1913 totals from Cool, and indeed could indicate an error in his figure for exports. The Makassar port administration's data for 1910 are more than twice as high for imports than those given in the central 'Statistisch jaaroverzicht' for 1908; on the export side the difference was even larger. In 1911 the port figures are about twice those reported by Cool. Three years later, in 1914, the difference was still of the same order of magnitude in both flows of trade. By 1918 the port's recorded imports were one-third higher than Cool's data, and for exports larger still, virtually twice as high. These discrepancies would seem to suggest that the official figures may have grossly underestimated both imports and exports. Clearly, different shipping is being listed.

If we want to understand the actual circumstances of Makassar's commerce we need to have some idea of what is, and is not, being counted. The change in registration practice in 1912 is an obvious possible cause of these discrepancies, particularly as some ports issued retrospective data, so there were two sets from 1903 to 1912 (Knaap 1989: 72). But the movement in the data sets is similar. Both show a sharp increase in imports between 1912 and 1913, with World War I soon reducing imports to pre-1912 levels. There is no striking change in exports.

Attempts to compare port shipping figures with central data can also be disconcerting, even if we limit our comparisons to steamship arrivals. Numbers run roughly parallel for years, before diverging and re-converging. Comparing the figures given in three sources, Poelinggomang, Touwen and the port statistics, we see that they are roughly of the same order of magnitude until 1907, when they go their separate ways. The Makassar harbour reports show roughly double the number of steamship arrivals as the other sources, which draw on the Batavia statistics (Table 5).

Table 5
Arrivals of Steamships in Makassar, 1907-1911. (number of vessels)

Source	1907	1908	1910	1911
Poelinggomang	314	202		
Touwen	304	212	225	325
Makassar Port	342	407	497	485

Sources: Poelinggomang 2002: Appendix IV, Table 2; Touwen 2001: Tables 5k, 6k; Jaarverslag Kamer van Koophandel 1912.

The situation for *perahu* (sailing vessels) is just as complex. Three different authors come up with different figures reflecting their sources (Table 6).

Table 6
Perahu Shipping in Makassar in Selected Years, 1905-1933.

Source	Total movement 1905	Total movements 1908	Total 1927	Total 1933
Statistiek	414	393		
Makassar data	2,052	4,140	5,871	7,930
Malewa			4,944	6,986

Sources: Statistiek van den handel 1906, as given in Poelinggomang 2002: 304; Asba 2007: 86 [Makassar data]; Malewa 1938, as given in Singgih 2003: 172.

CONCLUSION

The Netherlands Indies trade statistics provide a seductive wealth of information on different ports and commodities. When analysed within their own frame of reference, as a series or for comparisons within the data sets, they are an invaluable resource. The three examples sketched above come from the periphery of the colonial state and a period in which most of the region was still controlled by virtually independent rulers. Approximate data is only to be expected. Nonetheless, the proportion of unreported trade is very large, so that the material must be critically contextualised if it is to be used for the specifics of local history.

Even for regions, such as Java, where bureaucracies were stronger and sources both more voluminous and reliable, numbers should be treated with great caution. Data were filtered through several administrative levels with variable degrees of knowledge. Moreover, officials were not always willing to be open. The swings created by policy changes or shifts in compilation criteria create further distortions. The level of 'unknown unknowns' is so high that we run the risk of perceiving a commercial landscape that is created by the data, and consequently likely to be very different from the reality.

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