Aboriginal-Dutch Relations in North Queensland, 1606-1756

by

N. A. Loos, B.A.

The Dutch were the first Europeans to leave records of their contacts with the Aborigines of North Queensland which could prove useful to the ethno-historian. Between 1606 and 1756 there were four known Dutch voyages in which a total of eight ships sailed along the North Queensland coast and made contact with the Aborigines. These encounters with the Aborigines were frequent and often resulted in violent conflict. They helped to give the Aborigines a reputation for aggressiveness and bloodthirsty treachery which contrasts markedly with the first British contacts in North Queensland. There are many problems when two races with vastly differing cultures make first contacts and the solution of these problems depends upon a desire in both races that such contacts will be peaceful and mutually rewarding. This entails goodwill, tolerance, restraint, and caution. The intruder has to accept the responsibility for, and take the initiative in, achieving peaceful first contacts. It will be seen that the attitude of the Dutch towards the Aborigines of North Queensland ensured that such encounters would be disastrous.

The Dutch East India Company was interested primarily in achieving large profits as quickly as possible and with pre-empting other European powers. By the late 16th and early 17th centuries, they were challenging Portuguese domination of the East Indies and their discovery of the north coast of Australia was part of this aggressive competitiveness.

In their attitude towards "primitive" people, the Dutch were conditioned by previous European experience and expected resistance which could result in "treacherous murder." They 'had all the confidence of men of achievement’ and in their dealings with their opponents had proved themselves fierce and ruthless. Very little is known about one of the earliest Dutch expeditions known to have reached Australia. In November 1605 William Jansz, Captain of the Duyfken, was sent to explore the land of New Guinea. After sailing along part of the south coast of this island, Jansz sailed south along the west coast of Cape York Peninsula to Cape Keerweer 134° south latitude early in 1606. The Duyfken then sailed north again leaving the coast just south of Cape York. When Jansz sent men on shore to initiate trade, it is reported, ‘there were nine of them killed by the Heathens, which are man-eaters; so they were constrained to return finding no good to be done there.’ One unfortunate encounter with the Aborigines occurred at the Batavia River on the northward journey when one Dutchman was speared fatally. It is not clear where the other lives were lost, and it is possible that some or all of these fatalities occurred in New Guinea. It appears that at this time no distinction was made between the New Guineans and the Australian Aborigines.

A second known expedition to North Queensland is more useful to the historian as the journal has survived and the actual encounters can to some extent be analysed. In addition, it is possible to suggest reasons for the disastrous encounters of 1606. In January 1623, two ships the Pera and the Arnhem, under the command of Jan Carstensz proceeded along the south coast of New Guinea and south along the west coast of Cape York Peninsula to 17° 08’S. Soon after turning north back along the coast the Arnhem separated from the Pera and sailed westwards out of North Queensland waters. The Pera continued its voyage north leaving the North Queensland coast not far south of Cape York. The instructions under which the Pera and the Arnhem sailed clearly indicate a major source of the conflict on this and probably the previous voyage. The expressed prime importance of discovering profitable trade made nonsense of the instruction:

‘If any natives should come near your ships, you will likewise take due care that they suffer no molestation from our men.’

For not only were the Dutch instructed to find what valuable commodities the Aborigines possessed and what were their needs; they were also told to kidnap ‘full-grown persons, or better still, . . . boys and girls, to the end that the latter may be brought up here and be turned to useful purpose in the said quarters when occasion shall serve.’ Logan Jack concluded that the Dutch were trying to capture slaves to defray the cost of the expedition, but it seems that the prime aim was to capture Aborigines to act as informants about their land and culture and possibly to help establish communications later between the Dutch and the Aborigines. Such instructions made restraint in contact situations difficult and made vigorous Aboriginal resistance likely.

Although the Dutch sighted the Australian mainland on 12 April 1623, at approximately 11° 45’S., and Aborigines were seen on several occasions, attempts made to communicate with them were unsuccessful until 18 April at approximately 15° S. Here, as soon as the Dutch landed, a large number of Aborigines approached them with no sign of fear, handling the strange, but interesting muskets and showing interest in iron and beads. The Dutch grasped this opportunity and ‘seized one of the blacks by a string which he wore round his neck, and carried him off to the pinnace’. When the Dutch tried to land at the same place the next day, there were over two hundred Aborigines waiting to try by every means to surprise and overcome them. The Dutch were compelled to fire two shots at them, killing one Aboriginal and setting the rest to flight. It seems likely that the Dutch had been under observation as they made slow progress along the coast and that the Aborigines exhibited ‘fear and avoidance’, a normal reaction of Aborigines to alien intrusion. Probably this initial fear diminished as the Aborigines became more familiar with these strangers and as their curiosity and, perhaps, their cupidity grew. It is very likely that knowledge of the visitors was communicated along the coast. They tried to take the muskets, whose power they obviously did not understand, and ‘wanted to have whatever they could make of’. Here, as later, were demonstrated both the great initial interest even the most mundane of the Europeans’ material possessions had for the Aborigines, and the Aborigines’ failure to appreciate the great value the Europeans placed on these possessions.

On 24 April at 17° 08’S., it was decided that the expedition should turn north again landing ‘at divers places to collect water and Aborigines. Carstensz was disappointed at the zeal of his men:

. . . it was furthermore proposed by me and ultimately approved by the council, to give ten pieces of eight to the boatmen for every black they shall get hold of on shore, and carry off to the yachts, to the end that the men may use greater diligence in this matter, and Our Masters may reap benefit from the capture of the blacks, which may afterwards redound to certain advantages.’

On the journey north the Dutchmen made more than a dozen landings, saw Aborigines four times without being able to establish contact, and had hostile relations with them on three occasions, at

*Lecturer, Townsville Teachers College.
approximately 14°S., 13°S., and at 11°48'S. On the second occasion, conflict occurred only after Carstensz’ landing party induced the Aborigines to make contact by holding up pieces of iron and strings of beads. As soon as the Europeans were close, an unarmed Aboriginal was seized around the waist and dragged to the pinnace whereupon . . . the other blacks seeing this, tried to rescue their captured brother by furiously assailing us with their assegays; in defending ourselves we shot one of them, after which the others took to flight . . .

Immediately after this conflict, Carstensz laments: that in all places where we landed, we have treated the blacks or savages with especial kindness, offering them pieces of iron, strings of beads and pieces of cloth, hoping by so doing to get their friendship and be allowed to penetrate to some considerable distance landward . . . but in spite of all our fair semblance the blacks received us as enemies everywhere, so that in most places our landings were attended with great peril . . .

There can be no doubt that the abrasive eagerness of the Dutch to discover whether valuable trade prospects existed and their attempts to kidnap Aborigines at every opportunity were largely responsible for their hostile reception. One is tempted also to suggest that these factors contributed to the conflict Jansz experienced, especially as contemporaries of Jansz, in similar circumstances, were known to kidnap Aborigines they encountered. Carstensz gave the first known detailed description of the Aborigines. He concluded that they were 'less cunning, bold and evil-natured than the blacks at the western extremity of Nova Guinea; their weapons . . . are less deadly, than those we have seen used by other blacks'. They were 'the most wretched and poorest creatures' he had ever seen.18

Yet in his report on his contact with the Aborigines of Cape York Peninsula he stressed 'the great peril' of landing upon the coast and the need for well-drilled and experienced soldiers to accompany landing parties.19 The nervous tenor of this report seemed to stem mainly from his ignorance of the people and of their potential danger and from expectations raised by encounters with 'primitive' peoples elsewhere. He claimed to detect a greater hostility and sophistication in their dealings with Europeans in the Aborigines of the far north of Cape York Peninsula, between 10° and 11°S., maintaining this was caused by their clashes with the men of the Duyfken. They seemed acquainted with muskets 'of which they would seem to have experienced the fatal effect, when in 1606 the men of the Duyfken landed.'20 However, it is possible that information about how dangerous the aliens were was passed along the coast. This may have revived memories of the Duyfken's visit. At the scene of one such clash with Jansz' men, Carstensz found the Aborigines threatening and 'full of suspicion', determined to wound and capture one of the Dutchmen until the Dutch fired upon them wounding one fatally. A piece of metal was found in the wounded man's net seeming to corroborate Carstensz' conclusion that the previous contact with the Duyfken had produced this aggression.21 The lessons of the expeditions led by Jansz and Carstensz were there for all their contemporaries to see. First and skilful judgement' and to ignore their slight misdemeanours. 'Whoever endeavours to discover unknown lands and tribes, had need to be patient and long suffering . . . always bent on ingratiating himself'. Although they were told to find out all possible about the people, they were cautioned 'not to carry off with you any natives against their will, but if a small number of them should be willing to come hither of their own accord, you will grant them passage'.22

The next known voyager to North Queensland was Abel Jansen Tasman. In 1644, in command of the Limmen, Zeemeeuwe, and Bracq, he sailed past Torres Strait, failing to detect that passage, down the west coast of Cape York Peninsula, around the head of the Gulf of Carpentaria, and westwards along the coast to Western Australia. No journals or primary charts of this voyage have been found and no reliable details of the voyage. In a letter to the East India Company in the Netherlands an official in Batavia reported:

Thus they secured nothing advantageous, but only poor naked beach-runners, without riches, or noteworthy fruits, very poor, and at many places bad natured men . . . who shall investigate what the lands give, must walk therein and through.23

The Dutch were not destined to do this for after Van Diemen’s death there was a slackening of deliberate exploration while they decided to concentrate on exploiting what they had.24 Tasman's instructions concerning the treatment of people encountered also urge restraint and forbid kidnapping, but his relationship with the Aborigines does not seem to have been friendly. One clash is reported at second-hand, but it is not clear whether it occurred on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula or at Roebuck Bay, Western Australia, as the latitude, 17°12'S. but no longitude is given.25 The unsociable nature of the Aborigines was further consolidated by Tasman's 1644 voyage and had become 'a maxim of Dutch policy'.26
In 1644, the Dutch admitted their comparative ignorance of the people with which the 'South-lands' were peopled but confidently presumed them to be 'rude, wild fierce barbarians' and drew on their own experience with the New Guineans and the experiences of Europeans with other 'barbarians' to augment their limited acquaintance with the Aborigines. The evidence against the Aborigines was slight and biased, their guilt suggested by geographical and historical association. Further penetration of the 'South-lands' seemed dangerous and unprofitable when compared with the easy exploitation of the species. Dutch interest in exploring the 'South-lands' waned but did not cease until the British confidently led a new wave of exploration to the area in 1770.

It was over a hundred years, however, before the next known Europeans set foot on North Queensland. Strangely, they seem to have reverted to the attitude of Carstensz, taking every opportunity to kidnap Aborigines. Yet a Dutch expedition setting out in 1705 was still instructed not to use violence against 'unknown Indians' and to bring two or three as informants only if they came 'of their own will'. On 8 February 1756, the Rijder, commanded by Lt. Jean Etienne Gonzal, and the Buijs, commanded by First Mate L. Ludowijk Van Asschens, set out from Batavia but were parted by a storm at Batavia. The Buijs reached Banda on 1 April and sighted Cape York Peninsula at 12° 58'S, near Peta Head on 23 April. Asschens sailed north close to the land until he reached 10° 56'S. Here a boat with eight men was sent out to take soundings towards land and was never seen again. Possibly it was wrecked in the shoals or the crew fell into the hands of hostile Aborigines. Asschens waited till 12 May before he sailed for Timor Laut. He had not set foot on land. After separating from the Buijs, the Rijder, commanded east sight, probably Prince of Wales and Hammond Islands on 10 April and making several landings on Prince of Wales Island from 17 to 26 April. Here a Torres Strait Islander was seen but he fled. From 28 April to 13 May the Rijder remained at what was probably Wednesday Island waiting for the Buijs. On 28 April a party from the ship had encountered some Islanders who also fled. The Rijder put out to sea on 13 May sailing south and did not sight the Australian mainland until 24 May at 12° 18'S. The next day Gonzal anchored at 12° 26'S, nine miles south of Duyfken Point. Four Aborigines in two canoes rowed towards the ship signifying they wanted the Dutchmen to land. The following day when the Dutch went ashore, they encountered several Aborigines who fled, soon returning, however, armed with spears and accompanied by a number of women. All of the Aborigines sat down on the beach near the Europeans apparently waiting for communication to be initiated. When the Dutch signified they wanted the Dutchmen to land. The following day the Dutch went ashore too late the next day, 27 May, 'to lure the natives to the beach... to get hold of one or two'. But on 28 May the Aborigines greeted the Dutch landing party with 'dancing and singing, sat down close to them, laid aside their... weapons, and again enjoyed the liquor with which our men plied them.' The Dutch seized two of them whereupon the others retrieved their weapons and attacked the Dutch but with no success. A volley from the Dutchmen wounded an Aborigine and caused the others to flee into the bush. One of the two Aboriginal captives escaped. More than fifty Aborigines gathered to attack the Dutchmen but another volley of musketry dispersed them.

The Dutch ship had apparently aroused the curiosity of the Aborigines and on 30 May, while at anchor at 12° 31'S, Aboriginal canoes had approached the Rijder, inspecting her from a distance. It seems likely that the Rijder and the Buijs, a month before, had both been under observation, the initial alarm at the appearance of these strange craft and their crew changing to interest; an interest both been under observation, the initial alarm at the appearance of the canoes had approached the ship and were given sugared arrack by the Dutch, bodies daubed with red and were given sugared arrack by the Dutch, and interested in what the Dutchmen wanted water, the Aborigines immediately conducted them 'to a pleasant valley with fine trees... the dwelling-place of the natives' and gave them water from their wells. After the Dutch returned to the beach, nineteen Aborigines approached them with their bodies daubed with red and were given sugared arrack by the Dutch, after which the Aborigines performed 'a frolic with a kind of song', the first record of Europeans having been entertained with a corroboree. The Dutch went ashore too late the next day, 27 May. 'to lure the natives to the beach... to get hold of one or two'. But on 28 May the Aborigines greeted the Dutch landing party with 'dancing and singing, sat down close to them, laid aside their... weapons, and again enjoyed the liquor with which our men plied them.' The Dutch seized two of them whereupon the others retrieved their weapons and attacked the Dutch but with no success. A volley from the Dutchmen wounded an Aborigine and caused the others to flee into the bush. One of the two Aboriginal captives escaped. More than fifty Aborigines gathered to attack the Dutchmen but another volley of musketry dispersed them.

The Rijder anchored at 12° 57'S, to make repairs and to take on water and firewood but no Aborigines approached them although the ship was probably observed. At approximately 13° 10'S latitude, on 15 June, a boat's crew landed after being met by a canoe containing two Aborigines who invited them to come ashore. Here the Dutch landing party met eleven armed men and five women who apparently did not know the Dutchmen's reputation. They immediately approached the Dutchmen, apparently fascinated by their clothing. When the Dutchmen prevented the Aborigines from taking their hats, the Aborigines threatened them with their spears and a shot was fired whereupon they fled except for one youth who was seized and taken to the ship. On 16 June it was decided to sail west while the winds were still favourable.

The callosum determination of the Dutchmen to take Aboriginal prisoners, the criticism of Asschens by his superiors for making no landings in the forty miles of coast he sailed along, and the reports made by Gonzal, that the Aborigines had some knowledge of gold, and that the 'country... would probably prove very fertile', indicate some revival of interest in possible exploitation of New Holland. The Rijder and Buijs had been instructed to make frequent landings to discover the nature of the country and Gonzal's report was quite encouraging when taken in conjunction with the apparent ease with which he mastered the Aborigines. However, the next known European to set foot on New Holland was not Dutch but British, whose dealings with and attitudes towards the Aborigines would lead to very different relationships with them and a very different opinion of them.

To a large extent, the possibility of the Dutch having amicable relations with the Aborigines of North Queensland was aborted by their attitude towards the Aborigines and their lack of restraint and respect in their dealings with them. Yet the disastrous nature of early Dutch contacts with the North Queensland Aborigines and their tendency to think of these in conjunction with their even more disastrous contacts with the New Guineans led them to conclude that the Aborigines were treacherous murderers. One is lead to wonder as did Mulvaney, how far their Calvinist philosophy was a 'determining influence in conditioning Dutch attitudes'. Mulvaney thought there was a remarkable uniformity of attitude of Captain and Council towards the Aborigines from 1606 to 1756 to expect the worst of any natives they might meet. He suggested this could stem from the Calvinist belief that heathen practices were 'the badges of unregenerate and unrepentant savagery; depravity and treachery the keynotes of the state of nature'.

One does not find the passionate desire to save souls that motivated the Catholic de Quiros, nor would one expect it. The extant records are the journals and despatches of the servants of a merchant company. An Almighty God who could bless a journey with success was freely acknowledged. A rather perfunctory concern for the heathen who had not 'come to the salutory light of the Christian religion' was appended to Tasman's instructions which however reminded him in eloquent terms of the 'inestimable riches, profitable tradings, useful exchanges, fine dominions, great might and powers' that had ensued from discovery of the New World and the sea route to the East Indies. Profit was clearly the most urgent motive.

It even seems an oversimplification to see Calvinism as the religion of the Dutch capitalist expansion and the subsequent attitudes and behaviour of the Dutch as consistent because of their Calvinist philosophy. Orthodox Calvinists did not gain political authority in the United Provinces until 1619 and even then it was not complete. It is estimated that only one third of the whole population adhered to the Official Dutch Reformed Church at the end of the eighteenth century. Calvinism may have been a factor in overseas expansion but much more importantly for the Dutch were their historic dependence on the sea, their favourable position for trade, and the war with Spain. This finally confronted them with the alternative of still greater expansion or unemployment and...
starvation for many dependent on the seafaring community.

By this time the Dutch merchants had developed a confidence and a notorious 'love of gain' which ensured they would challenge the Portuguese for the spice trade, a love of gain to which their Calvinist ministers were in the main hostile.

In the East Indies it is much more difficult to find the influence of Calvinism. Coen and Van Diemen complained incessantly that the overwhelming majority of the Dutch in Asia were very poor Christians and most sailors knew very little indeed about Calvinism. The employees of the East India Company were termed the 'dregs of Dutch society' and 'louts from the depths of Germany'. Many respectable middle and upper-class Dutchmen would not enlist in the Company's service, the bulk of the employees being men who had no other resources. Little real attempt was made to render them orthodox Calvinists and little achieved. Fewer than 1,000 predikants left the United Provinces to serve in the East during the two centuries of the Company's existence, many of these staying only a few years.

At Batavia in 1670 there were only six predikants for the care of 20,000 souls.

In Asia, in the seventeenth century, Boxer claims Roman Catholicism had more appeal to the Dutch than Calvinism.

Yet more basic than the differences created by the various Christian sects and much more influential in race relationships was the European-wide belief in the superiority of Europeans over other 'races'. This belief was stronger among the Dutch and the English than among the Portuguese and the Spanish, and, admittedly, strongest of all among the orthodox Calvinists. However on the merchant-adventurer frontier of Asia there seems to have been little to distinguish in rapacity one European nation from another. There was a general belief that Asian lives were of little worth.

Professor Boxer probably best sums it up:

Religious differences widened the gulf between Europeans and Asians...the 17th century Calvinist Dutch fully shared the contemporary Romanist Portuguese belief in the unquestionable right of European Christians to exploit all lesser breeds beyond the pale of Christendom.

The 'lesser breeds' it seems were respected in proportion to their political and military strength. Consequently the Dutchmen regarded the Aborigines they met in North Queensland as dangerous savages with whom no meaningful, mutually acceptable relationship could be, or indeed need be, entered into.

ENDNOTES

1. Claims have been made for European voyages to northern Australia during the sixteenth century and similar claims for Asian voyages reach back to the sixth century B.C. It is not within the scope of this study to examine these voyages as the available evidence is scanty and inconclusive. It cannot be accepted as useful in shedding light on Aboriginal contacts with aliens. Refer A. Sharp, The Discovery of Australia (Oxford, 1963), Chapter One; C. M. H. Clark, A History of Australia, v.1 (Melbourne, 1963), Chapter Two; M. Flinders A Voyage to Terra Australis..., v.2, Australiana Facsimile Edition number 37, (Adelaide, 1966), pp. 228-233.


5. Clark, p. 22.


7. Sharp, Discovery of Australia, pp. 17-19. Refer Appendix of Sharp's work for Instructions to Tasman, 1644 in which the trip is summarised.


10. Heeres, pp. 35-6, Heeres gives long extracts from the journals of the Dutch explorers.

11. Heeres, pp. 36-7.


13. F. J. Byerley (ed.), *Narrative of the Queensland Expedition from Rockhampton to Cape York, Northern Queensland. Compiled from the Journals of the Brothers, and edited by Frederick J. Byerley (Engineer of Roads, Northern Division of Queensland)* (Brisbane, 1867), pp. 78-9.

14. Heeres, p. 36.

15. Heeres, p. 37. The 'council' is the decision making council made up of officers of the Company.


17. Sharp, *Discovery of Australia*, p. 25. In 1606-7, Torres accumulated about twenty Pacific Islanders for the King of Portugal.


20. Heeres, p. 43.


25. Sharp, *Discovery of Australia*, p. 64. Refer also Heeres, p. XVI of Introduction.


28. Sharp, *Discovery of Australia*, p. 64. Refer also Heeres, p. XVI of Introduction.

29. Sharp, *The Voyages of Abel Jansoon Tasman*, p. 332, where he quotes Nicholas Witsen, who wrote in a geographical work published in 1705: Southern latitude in seventeen degrees and twelve minutes, on the South-land at *Hollandia Nova, Tasman* has met very bad and barbarous, naked black Men, who have curly hair; . . . they came once with doubled weaponry fifty in number, on beach, dividing into three groups, and intended to attack the Hollanders who to the number of five and twenty had stepped on land, but the letting off of firearms astonished them so, that they fled.


31. Mulvaney, p. 4.

32. Heeres, p. 87.


34. Heeres, p. 94. For the whole expedition, refer Heeres, pp. 93-9. Also refer Jack, pp. 75-81.

35. Jack, p. 80. Refer also Heeres, p. 94.

36. Heeres, p. 94.

37. Heeres, p. 94.


41. Heeres, p. 97.

42. Jack, p. 78. Chief cartographer at Batavia writing to the Dutch East India Company was most critical of Asschens.

43. Mulvaney, pp. 5-6.


46. Boxer, p. 126.


48. Masselman, p. 113.

49. Boxer, p. 115.

50. Boxer, pp. 135 & 216.

51. Boxer, p. 115.

52. Boxer, p. 140.

53. Boxer, p. 140.
