

The Robben Island Rebellion of 1751: A Study of Convict Experience at the Cape of Good Hope

PAUL TRUTER

University of Cape Town

Since James Armstrong's description of Cape slavery from 1652-1795,¹ most of the research into forced migration to the Cape during the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) period has focused on the experience of slaves. Robert Ross drew on Edward Thompson's work on the English working class to describe the active role that slaves played in shaping Cape society and the centrality of slave resistance to this process.² Both Ross and Nigel Penn made extensive use of the criminal records of the Council of Justice to construct narratives of slave resistance.³ Nigel Worden demonstrated the value of comparative method as a yardstick to analyse Cape slavery in rural areas during the VOC period,⁴ and Richard Elphick and Robert Shell used statistical methods to examine the slave trade and intergroup relations between slaves, Khoikhoi, settlers and free blacks at the Cape.⁵

Less attention has focused on the role of convicts in this system of forced migration.⁶ I use the term 'convict' inclusively to describe criminals, political prisoners and exiled rulers who were part of the VOC's penal system. The scarcity of work focused on convicts during the VOC period might reflect that it is somewhat artificial to draw a distinction that is too rigid between convicts and slaves, especially considering that many convicts were ex-slaves, and the manner in which the boundaries between 'convict' and 'slave' often overlapped.⁷ Another possible reason for the paucity of detailed information about convicts in the VOC's system of forced migration may be due to the complications and difficulties involved in following these characters through the archival resources of three continents.⁸ The result has been that many works examining Cape slavery during the VOC period have only briefly accounted for the convict presence at the Cape.⁹ Although historians such as CR Boxer wrote accounts that described

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1. JC Armstrong, 'The slaves, 1652-1795', in R Elphick and H Giliomee, eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 1979).
 2. EP Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London 1978) cited in R Ross *Cape of Torments*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 3.
 3. See N Penn, *Rogues, Rebels and Runaways: Eighteenth-Century Cape Characters* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999) and Ross, *Cape of Torments*.
 4. N Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
 5. See R Shell, 'The Tower of Babel: The Slave Trade and Creolization at the Cape, 1652-1834', EA Eldredge and F Morton, eds., in *Slavery in South Africa: Captive Labor on the Dutch Frontier*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1994); and R Elphick and R Shell, 'Intergroup relations: Khoikhoi, settlers, slaves and free blacks, 1652-1795', in R Elphick and H Giliomee eds., *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652-1840*.
 6. K Ward, "'The Bounds of Bondage': Forced Migration from Batavia to the Cape of Good Hope during the Dutch East India Company era, c. 1652-1795', (PhD dissertation, University of Michigan, 2001), 15.
 7. *Ibid.*, 276.
 8. *Ibid.*, 13.
 9. See, for example, Elphick and Shell, 'Intergroup relations', 147; and JC Armstrong, 'The slaves, 1652-1795', (1979), 85-86.

the commercial mechanics of the VOC empire as a whole, not much attention was focused on the specific role of convicts and exiles within this empire, especially in relation to the social history of the Cape.¹⁰

Using the convict rolls Elphick and Shell calculated that approximately 200 to 300 convicts were banished to the Cape during the eighteenth century.¹¹ The total number of convicts at the Cape, as I have defined them, would have been much larger, considering that the number calculated by Elphick and Shell only reflects convicts from the East Indies who were listed in the convict rolls as *Indiaanen*. This total does not include Chinese convicts and European criminals who were placed in separate categories.¹² Nor does this number include the slaves, Company servants and others who attained convict status whilst at the Cape. Together these groups would have constituted a sizeable population.

Only recently have historians begun to explore the networks of forced migration of convicts and exiles within the VOC's imperial realm.¹³ James Armstrong's account of the Chinese at the Cape linked the Cape and Batavia, and in particular examined the important role played by this small segment of the convict population in Cape society.¹⁴ Kerry Ward produced the first major study of the movement of convicts between the Cape and Batavia, which demonstrated that it was not only slaves that played a significant role in the VOC's system of forced migration.¹⁵ Ward described the links between the VOC's colonies, such as the one between the Cape and Batavia, as 'different negotiated relationships of control' to emphasise the manner in which a dialogue existed between the VOC's colonies.¹⁶ This exchange was conducted on a number of political, social and cultural levels. Central to Ward's thesis is the notion that this continual exchange resulted in convict status being less fixed than that of slaves. Ward, for example, points out that in contrast to slaves, convicts were often released and would return to their former positions within the Company's realm.¹⁷ Another reason posited by Ward for the fluidity of convict status was that convicts as a group were even more heterogeneous than slaves. They were banished from very different locations in the empire and forced together by the Company's system of control. Convicts, for example, contrasted with slaves in that they had Europeans amongst their number.¹⁸ Ward examined the manner in which convicts experienced and responded to the VOC's imposition of its authority, and she identified

10. C Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600-1800* (London: Penguin Books, 1965).

11. R Elphick and R Shell, 'Intergroup relations' 147; Nigel Penn estimates that 312 East Indian convicts landed at the Cape between 1722 and 1748. See N Penn, 'Robben Island 1488-1805', in H Deacon ed., *The Island: A History of Robben Island 1488-1990*, (Cape Town: David Philip, 1996).

12. JC Armstrong, 'The Chinese at the Cape in the Dutch East India Company Period, 1652-1795' (Slave Route Project Conference, Cape Town 1997) 3. Armstrong calculated that approximately 350 Chinese were banished to the Cape during the VOC period.

13. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 10.

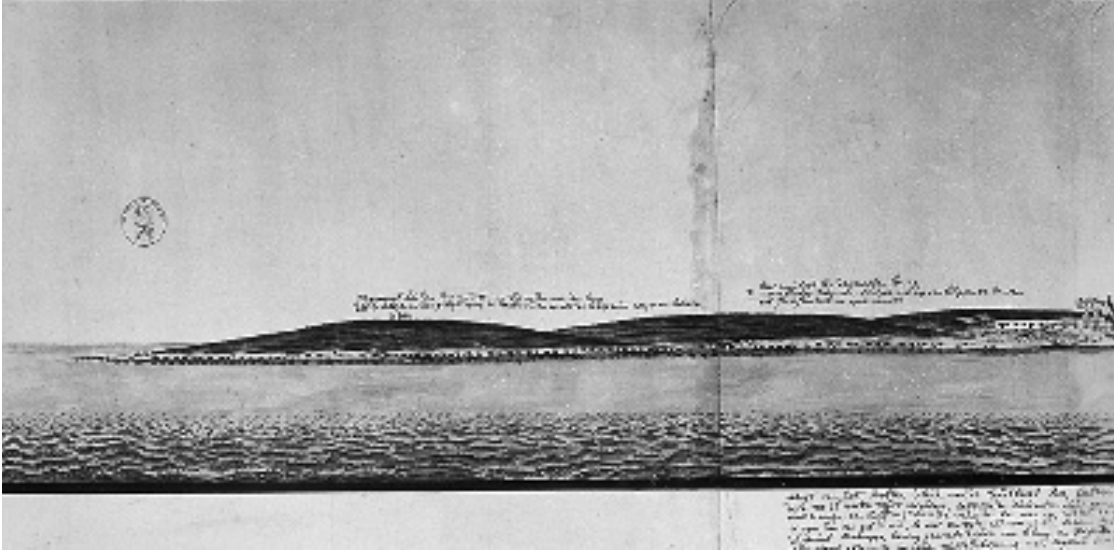
14. JC Armstrong, 'The Chinese at the Cape'.

15. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 15.

16. *Ibid.*, 4.

17. K Ward, 'Expatriation and repatriation in the Indian Ocean World: The movement of convicts and exiles between the Cape of Good Hope and the Netherlands East Indies under the Dutch East India Company', (Paper presented to the International Conference on the VOC, University of Stellenbosch, 3-5 April 2002), 1.

18. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 226.



Drawing of the Island by Colonel Robert Gordon, 1777.

the Cape, and in particular Robben Island, as places of banishment that were central to the maintenance of the Company's control.¹⁹ The narrative that follows is an attempt to focus on some of these developments in the study of *bandieten* and *bannelingen* at the Cape of Good Hope during the VOC period, through reconstructing the events of a convict rebellion that took place on Robben Island in 1751.²⁰ I hope to shed light on issues of identity, status and the imposition of, and reaction to, the Company's attempts to assert its authority. Throughout my narrative I seek to explore convicts' social relations on the Island by comparing their experiences with those of slaves at the Cape.

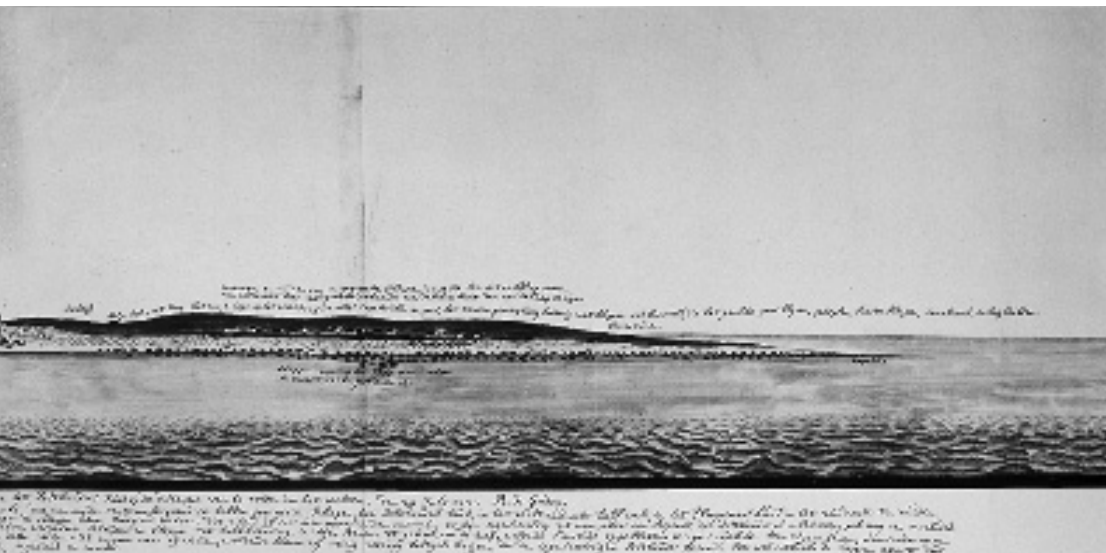
The isolation of Robben Island from the economic centre of the VOC empire in Asia in terms of distance, and from the Cape in terms of its separation from the Castle by the Atlantic waters of Table Bay, made it the ideal place for the banishment of convicts considered to be a collection of the most threatening individuals to colonial society.²¹ Although the island was situated on the fringes of the Company's jurisdiction, it was also a meeting place for criminals, exiles, political prisoners and slaves from the East Indies, the Cape and Europe. Dutch presence on the island was limited to the Postholder Sergeant and his two Corporals,²² and although the Dutch represented the island as a location outside of the parameters

19. Ibid., 253.

20. The court records which provide the main source of this narrative are stored in the Cape (Government) Archives (CA), CJ 33: Original rolls and minutes, 92-97; CJ 359: Documents in criminal cases, 319-371; CJ 788: Criminal Sententien (sentences), 81-88; N Penn, 'Robben Island 1488-1805', 29-30. Penn has written a short but useful description of this case. Ward has written a more detailed account of this case and examined further cases that are linked to it. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 257-266.

21. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 41.

22. CA CJ 359, 359.



of civilised society, it was in certain respects a microcosm of the Cape in that a small Dutch presence sought to impose its control over a cosmopolitan collection of people who were part of the VOC's system of forced migration.

The harshness of the island's physical features seemed, to the colonial authorities, a fitting environment for the convicts and exiles serving their sentences there in the winter of 1751. The low lying island lay exposed to fluctuations in temperature and wind and its dry, sandy terrain was dominated by low grasses and shrubs frequented by lizards and small snakes, whilst its jagged coastline was lined by stones and rocky outcrops. The coastline was broken by a small landing beach situated on the eastern side of the island. Postholder Sergeant Frederick Hofman's house was located at the head of this beach. The more modest convicts' living quarters, 'the Kraal', was located not far away to the south.²³

Working conditions on the island appear to have been no more favourable than the living conditions. Although the convicts had a fair degree of free time, the tasks that they performed were laborious and monotonous. Convicts would collect and carry shells to the shell pile,²⁴ to await collection by a boat that would land at the island.²⁵ A stone-cutting place was located not far to the north-east of the Postholder's house, as was the shell pile on the beach,²⁶ and convicts on the

23. N Penn, 'Robben Island 1488-1805', 22-27. This description of the Island draws on Penn's account and a drawing of the Island made in 1777 by Colonel Robert Gordon.

24. CA CJ 359, 348.

25. CA CJ 359, 361.

26. N Penn, 'Robben Island 1488-1805', 27.

island could spend months at a time ‘*schulpen gedrage*’.²⁷ Shell collection for the lime kilns was not limited to Robben Island and convicts were sometimes taken to nearby Dassen Island for the same purpose.²⁸ Dassen Island also acted as an alternative venue for the acquisition of train oil, which the convicts extracted from seal blubber.²⁹ Convicts would also spend time collecting firewood, which they stored in small piles behind the Kraal.³⁰

It was whilst performing these everyday tasks that in 1751 certain East Indian convicts began to plan a most unusual and unlikely rebellion against the Dutch soldiers and European convicts on the island, which the conspirators hoped would culminate in an ambitious escape to the East Indies. All the convicts’ confessions recorded in the criminal records of the Council of Justice identified Robbo of Bouton and Radja Boekit as the chief conspirators.³¹

Leadership against the Company was nothing new to Radja Boekit. Boekit, a political prisoner, had been the Regent of Padang until he was sentenced in 1749 for participating in rebellion against the Company and exiled to the Cape ‘until further instructions were received.’³² He had been captured in the Minangkabau area of the west coast of Sumatra and sent to Batavia for sentencing.³³ It was, perhaps, not surprising that Boekit was at the forefront of the plot as one would expect that his background provided him with the ability to persuade fellow convicts to participate in resistance against the Dutch.

Robbo of Bouton had a far lower profile than Boekit and the records omit to mention the reason for his original conviction in 1739, which banished him to the Cape for twenty-five years in chains.³⁴ Robbo’s second conviction banished him (for theft and housebreaking at the Cape) to Robben Island for life.³⁵ This suggests that his prior conviction might have been for a similar misdemeanor, especially since the sentence was compatible with less serious offences. Although Robbo did not have the same history of overt resistance as Radja, his second conviction was committed with the assistance of at least one other accomplice.³⁶ These two leaders of the plot on the island encapsulate a distinction, referred to by Robert Ross (to describe prisoners being tried by the Council of Justice), between heroic revolutionaries who were perceived as rebels struggling against ‘the system’, and common criminals who were indiscriminate and ill-intentioned in their actions. Ross described how equal treatment by the Company would often blur the boundaries between these two types of criminals. Prisoners, for example, might receive the same or similar sentences in spite of their different motivations for committing crime.³⁷

27. CA CJ 359, 348.

28. K Ward, ‘The Bounds of Bondage’, 254.

29. N Penn, ‘Robben Island 1488-1805’, 26.

30. CA CJ 359, 341.

31. CA CJ 359, 319-371.

32. CA CJ 359, 366.

33. K Ward, ‘The Bounds of Bondage’, 258.

34. CA CJ 359, 366.

35. T Baartman, *Council of Justice: Cape Town Criminal Cases 1730-59*, (University of Cape Town: Cape Town History Project, 1994), 61. See CA CJ 358, 233-271.

36. *Ibid.*

37. D Hay *Albion’s Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England*, cited in R Ross *Cape of Torments*, 8-9.

One Sunday winter's morning around the shell pile on the beach, Robbo and Radja called a meeting amongst the East Indian convicts where the plan was proposed.³⁸ Some of the convicts, including Jephtha of Boegis, Joermoedi, Carre Tojeeng and Pomade of Maccassar admitted in their confessions that at this meeting they immediately consented to participate in the uprising.³⁹ Others, however, maintained that they were coerced or, at the very least, unwilling to participate in the plan. In his confession, Djang Marrowang asserted that although he wished to return to his country with his fellow men, he did not want to be complicit in murder.⁴⁰ Pannowar of Portovara claimed that he had initially refused to take part in the plan, but that Robbo had responded that he would kill him if he refused and so he had told Robbo that he would rather be a part of the plot than be murdered.⁴¹ Ladoe of Bugis claimed that Radja had threatened him in a similar manner. Toerbattoe of Mandhar claimed that although he had known of the plan, he had not given his consent to participate.⁴² The question arises as to whether these claims were true or whether they were solely made in a desperate attempt to avoid being held liable by the Court. It is interesting to note that even though the Prosecutor dismissed these claims as 'pretense', he nonetheless requested the Court to hand down a lesser sentence for these convicts.⁴³ This may indicate that he was not entirely sure as to the extent of their guilt.

The events that led to the plot on the Island being uncovered began on the morning of the 24th of May, when Corporal Frederick Deen complained to the Postholder that during the night September of Ternate had taken the key to his trunk from his pocket and stolen seven and a half rix-dollars. September handed six rix-dollars to Robbo of Bouton and retained the remainder. It is not clear whether the theft of this money was related to the plans for rebellion, although it is possible that Robbo intended using the money to procure knives from fellow convicts on the island. During the investigation September denied that he had taken the money by asserting that nobody on the island had that amount of money apart from the 'old prince', Daing Mangenam, who in any event had promised to give it to the Postholder.⁴⁴ The name the convicts on the island used to refer to Mangenam signified, firstly, that he enjoyed royal status. The heightened status of the prince will be explored in greater detail later on in this narrative. Secondly, this name may indicate that Daing Mangenam was the oldest or one of the oldest members of the island community.

On the 24th of June – the very next month – two knives belonging to the European convict Lodewijk Rets were stolen from the convict house in the vicinity of 'the Kraal'. Rets declared his dismay to the Postholder who ordered Rets to do his best to identify the perpetrators as well as those who had stolen money the previous month. Rets replied that the East Indian convicts had infor-

38. CA CJ 359, 325.

39. CA CJ 359, 338; 332; 333; 336.

40. CA CJ 359, 340.

41. CA CJ 359, 344.

42. CA CJ 359, 347.

43. CA CJ 359, 322.

44. CA CJ 359, 357-358.

mation concerning the theft of the money but were keeping it to themselves, and in particular, he implicated September of Ternate.⁴⁵ This seems to indicate that Rets must have had some means of communicating with, or understanding the East Indian convicts. All of the East Indian convicts testified in Bugis or Malay, which suggests that Rets may have acquired a rudimentary understanding of Malay, or Portuguese Creole, whilst in Batavia as a sailor for the Company. Both languages were *lingua franca* in the Indian Ocean world,⁴⁶ and the confession of the Chinese convict, Limoeijko, who was implicated but not convicted, provides evidence that Portuguese was spoken on the Island. Limoeijko professed his innocence by claiming that he did not understand the Bugis and Portuguese languages of the convicts involved in the plot.⁴⁷

The Postholder followed Rets' advice and summoned September who was fastened to the rack. The Postholder claimed that before September had received a single blow, the latter implicated Djan Marrowang, asserting that he had seen Djan with a half ducat. Djan was summoned, and it was not long until he too was securely fastened to the rack. Djan admitted that he was in possession of the half ducat, but explained that September had given it to him to exchange and had promised him a small reward for his troubles. In the light of the doubt created by September's stubborn denials, the Postholder proceeded to have both convicts whipped. Marrowang was steadfast in his assertion that he had received the half ducat from September.⁴⁸ The harsh beating to which September was subjected caused him to concede, eventually, that he had stolen the money and had buried it behind the convict house, adding that he had deliberately misled the Postholder in order to escape the latter's wrath.⁴⁹

The Postholder released September so that he could reveal where the one and a half ducats were buried. September led the Postholder to a spot behind the convict house and pointed out where the money was hidden. His freedom was short-lived, however, as both convicts found themselves fastened together once more for their respective roles in the affair. It was most likely the fear of impending punishment that prompted September and Djan to break free that same night. Unfortunately, the Postholder discovered them the next morning without much difficulty under piles of wood. In desperation September took flight and jumped into the sea, but the Postholder had him hauled out and September and Djan were chained together once more, only this time more securely.⁵⁰ Their desperate attempts to escape, which to the observer would seem pointless (as they would no doubt be caught again without much difficulty), provide an insight into the brutality of the punishment to which convicts on the island were subjected.

The morning of the 26th was set aside by the Postholder to punish Van Ternaten and Marrowang, who were chained together and whipped by

45. CA CJ 359, 357.

46. R Ross *Cape of Torments*, 14.

47. CA CJ 359, 364.

48. CA CJ 359, 358.

49. CA CJ 359, 359.

50. CA CJ 359, 358-359.

the Postholder and his Corporals. During the beating September pleaded the Postholder to pause as he wished to make something known to him. September, in what seemed to be a final attempt to cease the Postholder's brutality, proceeded to reveal the plan, which had been so carefully concealed by its conspirators. September informed the Postholder that the convicts Toerbattoe, Joermoedi, Pannowar, Robbo of Bouton, both of the Jephta's of Bugis, Carre Tojeeng, Djan Marrowang and Pomade under the leadership of Radja Boekit intended to rebel, run amok and kill all the Europeans on the Island. By his own admission, the Postholder disguised his concern, and released September provisionally. The following day he set about interrogating September about the planned uprising with renewed vigour. September replied that his revelation was merely a ruse to evade further punishment. The Postholder accepted this, thinking nothing further of the whole affair. Perhaps he felt that such a plan was too audacious to be true.⁵¹ The Postholder also implied in his confession that his fears of a rebellion were quelled by a report on the same day from one of the European convicts, Lodewijk Rets, notifying him that he had found his two knives that had gone missing in the same place where he had originally hidden them.⁵²

On Tuesday the 6th of July, however, the European convict Marten van der Klugt aroused the Postholder's suspicions once more by revealing that he had discovered a seal slaughtering knife that the convict Michiel van Embdneelen had been trying to find for several weeks, under a pile of firewood. The Postholder was extremely concerned about this report, especially since upon closer scrutiny of the knife, he noticed that a new handle had been attached and that both sides had been sharpened to a fine point. In the light of September's revelations a few days before, the Postholder had Radja Boekit locked into chains.⁵³ Boekit denied any knowledge of the knife. Not long thereafter Leander Coridon arrived and tipped off the Postholder that he would have to interrogate Carre Tooijeeng in order to establish the truth. The Postholder had Tooijeeng and September of Ternate chained together, waving the knife before them, which they confirmed they had seen in the possession of Radja Boekit. The next morning all the accused convicts that had been named by September of Ternate were individually summoned and interrogated about September's allegations. Despite his most brutal efforts, the Postholder was unable to extract any confessions until Robbo van Bouton admitted that all the convicts mentioned by September (and including September himself) had agreed to execute their plan on the 26th of June, when a provision ship was to arrive at the Island to pick up a load of shells.⁵⁴

In what seemed to be an attempt to deflect attention from his own leading role in the plot, Robbo proceeded to implicate Radja Boekit as the leader of the rebellion, and the manner in which the latter would set the plan in motion by murdering the two Corporals together with two unnamed members of the group.

51. CACJ 359, 360.

52. CA CJ 359, 359-360.

53. CACJ 359, 360.

54. CACJ 359, 361.

After this the rest of the group would murder the rest of the Europeans on the Island. Whilst the slaughter was underway on the shore, Joermoedi, Toerbattoe and Pannowar would overpower the crew of the ship and throw them overboard to drown. Once in control of the ship they would load it with provisions with the assistance of those on the shore. The sails would be raised, and they would flee to the East Indies. Following Robbo's startling account, the Postholder proceeded to interrogate Boekit once more. Finally, Boekit gave in to the Postholder and confirmed that Robbo's testimony was true. Boekit led the Sergeant to a spot where under a bush he had hidden a knife that was covered in dirt and had been missing for several months. It was following this discovery that the convicts were chained together in pairs and taken to the Cape to stand trial.⁵⁵

The foregoing account of the circumstances that led to the uncovering of the plot on the Island enables the rebellion to be more effectively contextualised in relation to the important arguments surrounding forced migration to the Cape during the VOC period. One of the most striking aspects of this case is the very different backgrounds of the group of convicts who stood trial for the attempted uprising. East Indian convicts, like slaves, were often categorised according to their place of origin. A number of historians have described the manner in which specific stereotypes developed as a result of 'attributes' or 'deficiencies' being imputed to them in accordance with their status of being part of a category.⁵⁶ At the top of the hierarchy were 'Malays', a broad category encompassing all people from South East Asia. They were believed to be intelligent and were greatly admired for their 'inherent' ability to do skilled work and produce fine craftsmanship.⁵⁷ The existence of the stereotype of the 'intelligent and able Malay' amongst the convicts on the island is revealed in the testimony of Djan Marrowang, who recalled that Radja Boekit had said that when he had gathered three or four Malays to assist in the rebellion he would not even bother to speak to the Bugis convicts and seek their allegiance.⁵⁸ The credibility of Djan's evidence was enhanced by September of Bugis' testimony that he had also heard Radja use this stereotype.⁵⁹ This finding is significant in that it seems to contrast with studies that have concluded that slaves did not internalise the stereotypes that the Dutch colonists perpetuated and were not overly concerned with ethnic differentiation.⁶⁰

As was the case with slaves, further distinctions were made between convicts who had been placed in broader categories. People of Bugis extraction were considered to be especially devious and most likely to run amok and kill their masters or their master's families.⁶¹ A brief survey of the convicts involved in the conspiracy on the Island reveals that eight of the convicts were Bugis and the others were from Macassar, South Sulawesi and islands nearby. The case seemed

55. CA CJ 359, 361-362.

56. R Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony 1750-1870*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.

57. *Ibid.*, 35.

58. CA CJ 359, 339.

59. CA CJ 359, 356.

60. R Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony*, 37.

61. *Ibid.*, 36.

to fulfill the negative stereotypes and the deepest fears that the Dutch held about East Indian forced labourers, particularly those of Bugis descent.⁶² The Prosecutor's explanation of the charges against the convicts contains numerous references, both overt and implicit, to the convicts' plans to run amok.⁶³ It seems that the stereotypes held by those conducting the court proceedings could well have influenced the way in which the threat on Robben Island was perceived. An insight into this fear is reflected by Postholder Frederick Hofman's testimony. After hearing of the planned uprising for the first time from September of Ternate, Hofman states that he released September 'without giving any indication that he was disturbed at all.'⁶⁴ This threat was, perhaps, compounded even more in the light of the fact that two of the Bugis convicts who had been slaves at the Cape, September of Bugis and Jephtha of Bugis, were banished to the Island for threatening to kill their masters. These threats had been made after they had received similar beatings to those meted out by the Postholder on the Island.⁶⁵

The Island was not only a meeting place for convicts of East Indian extraction, it was also a place of interaction between the latter and European convicts. Convict status would, in many instances, override distinctions of race.⁶⁶ The rebellion on Robben Island provides mixed evidence as to the extent to which the line between European and East Indian convicts was blurred. The only soldiers referred to in the case were the Postholder Sergeant Hofman and the Corporals Deene and Alt. These three men had the task of controlling at least forty convicts on the Island.⁶⁷ Although the soldiers were armed with firelocks,⁶⁸ it seems unlikely that three men would be able to control all the convicts on the Island without the cooperation of some of the convicts.⁶⁹

Indeed, the evidence from the case suggests that it was unlikely that the plot would have been uncovered without the assistance of certain convicts on the island (the majority of whom were European). This finding is analogous to studies of slaves at the Cape, which indicate that slave plots were most often disclosed to slave owners by other slaves.⁷⁰ Lodewijk Rets pointed the Postholder in the direction of September of Ternate concerning theft on the island.⁷¹ Marten van der Klugt reported to the Postholder that he had found a seal slaughtering knife that had been sharpened and hidden under the firewood pile to reawaken suspicions of a plot. Leander Coridon, informed the Postholder that he would have to question Carre Tooijeeng in order to establish the truth concerning the plot.⁷² Moreover, the free black, Arend van de Velde, and European convict, Michiel van Embdneelen

62. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 266-267.

63. CA CJ 359, 319-324.

64. CA CJ 359, 359-359. 'sonder te laaten blijken dat sig daarvan enigszins quam te steuren'.

65. CA CJ 358; CJ 359, 368.

66. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 16.

67. CA CJ 359, 359.

68. CA CJ 359, 331.

69. N Penn, 'Robben Island 1488-1805', 21.

70. R Shell 'The Tower of Babel: The Slave Trade and Creolization at the Cape, 1652-1834', in EA Eldredge and F Morton eds., *Slavery in South Africa: Captive Labor on the Dutch Frontier*, (Pietermaritzburg, University of Natal Press, 1994), 21.

71. CA CJ 359, 357.

72. CA CJ 359, 360.

were responsible for the Island's boat.⁷³ There must have been a fair degree of trust between the Postholder and these two convicts to entrust them with the Island's boat, which offered a means of possible escape, at least to the mainland.

These apparent acts of cooperation and complicity between certain convicts and the soldiers reflect the isolation of the Island community, which would have necessitated pragmatic choices by the Postholder and his two Corporals. Robert Ross has described the Company's use of small segments of its unfree workforce to assist in upholding the VOC's system of domination as 'symbolic inversion'.⁷⁴ The complicity between the soldiers and certain convicts on the Island strongly resembled the institution of the *Caffers*, the Fiscaal's servants in Cape Town, who punished slaves who were sent to them, assisted in carrying out the punishments of the Council of Justice, and acted as a police force at night.⁷⁵ The Company viewed the *Caffers* as symbolically 'unclean', in that they were convicts who had been 'tainted' by crime. Therefore they were considered suitably qualified to inflict punishment on criminals. It is interesting to note that a number of convicts accepted positions as Fiscaal's servants in order to escape imprisonment on the Island.⁷⁶ Similarly, the co-opting of forced migrants into the Company's system of control was widespread amongst slaves at the Cape. Slaves in the Company slave lodge were supervised by slave *mandoors*, who were rewarded by the Company for their services with special privileges.⁷⁷ The difference between the complicity on the mainland and the relations between the Dutch and convicts on the Island is that on the Island the Dutch were an even smaller minority than they were on the mainland, which indicates that it might have been even more crucial for them to enlist the assistance of subordinates.

Although the case reveals that cooperation between the soldiers and convicts on the Island was not confined to relations between the European convicts and soldiers, there is certainly evidence of differentiation between the European and East Indian convicts. Sergeant Hofman's testimony referred to a convict house situated in the vicinity of 'the Kraal', suggesting that these two structures were not one and the same.⁷⁸ The case records reveal that convicts inhabited 'the Kraal'. Nigel Penn has suggested that the European convicts may have lived in the convict house and their East Indian counterparts in 'the Kraal'.⁷⁹ This differentiation between the European convicts and their East Indian counterparts is expressed by Lodewijk Rets' report to the Postholder that the '*swarte jongens*' were concealing information about the theft of money.⁸⁰

Yet there are other reasons why Europeans convicts, such as Rets, may have had closer ties with the soldiers on the island than their East Indian counterparts. Rets was typical of most European convicts in that he had been a VOC

73. CA CJ 359, 321.

74. R Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony*, 19.

75. N Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, 37.

76. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 251.

77. JC Armstrong, 'The slaves, 1652-1795', 89.

78. CA CJ 359, 357.

79. N Penn, 'Robben Island 1488-1805', 21.

80. CA CJ 359, 357.

servant prior to his conviction.⁸¹ It is quite possible that the soldiers on the island associated more closely with European convicts, as the soldiers themselves were servants of the Company. The majority of cases adjudicated by the Council of Justice involved the lowliest of VOC servants such as soldiers, sailors and some artisans.⁸² Boxer noted that most VOC servants of low status were inadequately paid. This was exacerbated by the fact that part of their pay was withheld by the Company until the end of their employment term to prevent them deserting. Yet this measure would sometimes have the opposite effect as many Company servants would desert, or engage in illicit trading, or other illegal activities in order to supplement their meagre wages.⁸³

Lodewijk Rets' was born in The Hague and typified the average European convict in that his initial conviction was for desertion.⁸⁴ Rets, along with three accomplices, had deserted whilst in Batavia and was consequently sentenced to flogging, branding and banishment for ten years with hard labour. Rets, however, had other plans and he managed to escape whilst labouring on the Company works with three accomplices. On the run, Rets and an accomplice, Arnoldus van Zuijlen, developed a taste for more daring crimes. The two convicts went on a spree in Batavia, assaulting and robbing a number of unfortunate victims. The *Caffers* finally managed to catch up to Rets and Van Zuijlen and the two convicts were sentenced to flogging, branding, and banishment to Robben Island in chains.⁸⁵ Rets was banished from Batavia on the 14th of July 1744 to the Cape for 25 years and Van Zuijlen for five years.⁸⁶

Another possible reason for the European convicts on the Island allying themselves with the soldiers was that at the time of the rebellion the European convicts had been on the Island far longer than their East Indian counterparts. The convict rolls reveal that Michiel van Embneelen was banished to the Island in 1736, and Lodewijk Rets in 1744.⁸⁷ Over time they may have learnt to live alongside the Island's soldiers more amicably. In contrast, the longest serving East Indian convicts that were involved in the rebellion had only been banished to the Island in December 1748.⁸⁸ The finding that the newest arrivals on the Island were involved in the rebellion corresponds to historians' observations that groups of slaves who were most likely to escape were those who had been at the Cape for a short period of time.⁸⁹

The Island rebellion is also consistent with Armstrong's finding that large slave escapes generally involved slaves from different ethnic groups whose leaders were from the East Indies.⁹⁰ Kerry Ward has emphasised the importance of the diversity of people and places woven into the VOC empire and the manner

81. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 260.

82. *Ibid.*, 213.

83. C Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600-1800*, 201.

84. CA CJ 3188, *Bandieten Rollen, 1728-1795*. The convict rolls of the island provides details concerning each convict's sentence and place of birth.

85. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 216.

86. CA CJ 3188, *Bandieten Rollen, 1728-1795*.

87. *Ibid.*

88. CA CJ 359, 366-368.

89. JC Armstrong, 'The slaves, 1652-1795', 104-105.

90. *Ibid.*, 106.

in which this resulted in an exchange of knowledge between the various colonies along the Indian Ocean network of Company control. Ward argued that the Dutch were not always able to regulate the exchange and dissemination of this knowledge, which was often of an Islamic content.⁹¹ One crucial area of knowledge that was often beyond the control of the Dutch was that of language. The Island rebellion exemplified this clearly in that one of the reasons why the conspiracy was able to go undetected for so long resulted from the fact that the conspirators were able to plot in their own languages whilst going about their daily work. Moreover the guilt or innocence of the Prince of Maccassar, Daing Mangenam, and a Chinese convict named Limoeijko, who had been implicated but not convicted for playing a role in the conspiracy on the Island, turned largely on the question of whether they were able to understand the language of the plotters. In his confession (translated from Malay), Limoeijko asserted that although he had heard the other convicts speaking, he did not understand their Bugis and Portuguese languages and could therefore not possibly have been a part of the conspiracy.⁹² Only the confessions of Pomade of Macassar and Jephtha of Bugis appeared to provide any evidence suggesting that Limoeijko was guilty.⁹³ Yet Jephtha amended his testimony with respect to Limoeijko's involvement to say that he did not actually know whether the latter had intended to take part.⁹⁴

The evidence against Daing Mangenam, who relied on a similar defence, was far more substantial. The accusations against the Prince encompassed not only participation in the rebellion, but also of playing a leading role in planning the plot.⁹⁵ The Prince maintained that Robbo and Radja had falsely accused him, and that evidence of this was borne out by the fact that he could not speak or understand the Bugis language, or any Malay.⁹⁶ The Postholder supported the testimony of the Prince by asserting that he had never heard the Prince speaking to the Bugis convicts on the Island. The Court accepted that it was highly improbable that the Prince would not have been able to understand Bugis or Malay, but asserted that this needed to be weighed up against the testimony of the Postholder, who was considered an extremely reliable witness.⁹⁷

Kerry Ward has contended that the Prince's position in society and his ethnicity indicate that he was probably fluent in Bugis and Malay.⁹⁸ The question remains as to why the Court found that the Prince was not involved in the plot, in spite of conceding that it was unlikely that he would not have been able to speak Bugis or Malay. The Prince, after all, had more evidence pointing towards him than some of the convicts who were ultimately convicted. A possible clue to answering this question is provided by the Prosecutor's legal argument. The Prosecutor drew the Court's attention to the distinction between what he termed

91. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 91.

92. CA CJ 359, 364-364.

93. CA CJ 359, 335; 352.

94. CA CJ 359, 353.

95. CA CJ 359, 323.

96. CA CJ 359, 370.

97. CA CJ 359, 370.

98. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 259.

a common exile driven out of a country and sent to the Cape, and a prisoner of state who had to be treated ‘with care and considerable respect’.⁹⁹ The authorities at the Cape were extremely reluctant to convict prisoners of heightened political status – in particular royals who were prisoners of state – as this status imposed certain duties on Company officials.¹⁰⁰ The heightened status of the Prince illustrates the manner in which certain convicts subverted the designation of status in accordance with race that was so prevalent in much of the VOC’s colonial world.

The Prince was a member of the house of Tanete. In 1749 he was exiled to the Cape on the ship the *Polander* as a prisoner of state on the order of the Council of the Indies.¹⁰¹ Since it was not overly concerned with the continued existence of any specific ruling families, the VOC used exile of leaders such as the Prince as a bargaining mechanism in its dealings with polities in the East Indies.¹⁰² Such a relationship was considered necessary in the Macassarese and Bugis kingdoms in South Sulawesi in order to ensure the maintenance of trade links in the Indonesian Archipelago.¹⁰³ Due to his noble status, Daing Mangenam was granted a not inconsiderable allowance of ten rix-dollars a month.¹⁰⁴ The Postholder’s testimony referred to September of Ternate’s assertion that nobody on the Island had that sort of money apart from the ‘old prince’ who in any event had promised it to the Postholder.¹⁰⁵ This statement offers support for the conclusion that the Prince was an important source of income for the Postholder, and perhaps even for the Corporals, and other convicts on the island. It would certainly, therefore, have been in the Postholder’s interest to maintain the Prince’s presence on the island. The Prince asserted that there was no reason for him to be a party to the conspiracy as the Company provided him with his monthly allowance and all he required.¹⁰⁶ A further reason that might indicate that it was not in the Prince’s interests to take part in the uprising is the possibility that at some stage he would be able to seek repatriation. The fact that he was to be held until a further order had been received,¹⁰⁷ and no fixed sentence was specified, seemed to leave open the possibility of repatriation. A request for repatriation was most likely to succeed if it was accompanied by a request from a highly ranked Company official. The Prince may have hoped that the Postholder would, at some stage, support such a request. Requests for repatriation were usually fulfilled if prisoners were too old to pose a threat to the Company once returned to their countries of origin.¹⁰⁸ The records do not specify the age of the Prince. However, the fact that the other convicts called him the ‘old prince’ seems to indicate that his age would have supported such a request. Although it may

99. CA CJ 359, 323 ‘met omsigt en een bijzonder reguard’.

100. K Ward, ‘The Bounds of Bondage’, 143-144.

101. *Ibid.*, 259.

102. *Ibid.*, 65.

103. *Ibid.*, 129.

104. CA CJ 359, 368.

105. CA CJ 359, 357.

106. CA CJ 359, 369.

107. CA CJ 359, 368.

108. K Ward, ‘The Bounds of Bondage’, 134.

not have occurred as soon as he might have wished, the Prince was released in 1771.¹⁰⁹

Only four of the convicts specifically implicated the Prince, including the leaders of the planned rebellion, Robbo of Bouton and Radja Boekit. They not only stressed that the Prince was involved, but also that he had taken a leading role in planning the rebellion. Robbo went so far as to claim that the Prince ordered that a knife should be procured for the slaughter of the Europeans on the Island,¹¹⁰ and in an addition to his original confession, claimed that the Prince had addressed, and sought the cooperation of the Bugis prisoners in the Kraal, and was present at the shell pile whilst Radja Boekit held a meeting to seek the cooperation of the Malay prisoners.¹¹¹ Yet the only other convict who claimed that the Prince took a leading role was Carre Tooijeeng.¹¹² Unfortunately for Robbo and Radja the Council of Justice was not fooled by their apparent attempts to deflect attention from their own leading roles in the plot.

On the morning of Thursday the 5th of August 1751 the Council of Justice delivered its judgment from the Kat Balcony in the Castle.¹¹³ The Court sentenced the prisoners to be delivered to the executioner at the execution site located outside the Castle alongside the Cape Town road.¹¹⁴ Accused numbers one and two, Robbo of Bouton and Radja Boekit of Padang, were tied to crosses and had their limbs broken with a steel bar from the legs up while they were still alive.¹¹⁵ They were left bound to the wooden crosses to die slow, painful deaths. Accused numbers three to nine received the same sentence except that they were granted the *coup de grace* in mitigation of sentence once their limbs had been broken.¹¹⁶ The *coup de grace* was administered with the same bar by a blow to the chest.¹¹⁷ The last six prisoners were hung with ropes and then the dead bodies of all fifteen prisoners were transported to a second gallows site located on Lion's Rump on the edge of Cape Town.¹¹⁸ There the dead bodies of the first nine prisoners were set on wheels and those of the last six hung up on crosses where they were to left to hang 'as prey to the winds and the birds of the heavens'.¹¹⁹

The extreme pain and suffering inflicted on the convicts is only one aspect of their punishment that is significant. The second is the very public manner in which they were punished: from the public announcement of their sentences, to their executions at the first execution site alongside the Cape Town road, to the mounting of their corpses once more on the outskirts of town. Robert Ross' comment that '[t]error had to be used to control the slave population, and it had to be seen by them to be doing so' is equally applicable to the punishment meted out

109. CA CJ 359, 328.

110. CA CJ 359, 325.

111. CA CJ 359, 326.

112. CA CJ 359, 333.

113. CA CJ 33, 92.

114. CA CJ 33, 92; R Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony*, 19.

115. SA De Villiers, *Robben Island: Out of Reach, Out of Mind*, (Cape Town: Struik, 1971), 28.

116. CA CJ 33, 95.

117. SA De Villiers, *Robben Island: Out of Reach, Out of Mind*, 27-28.

118. CA CJ 33, 95; K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 265.

119. CA CJ 33, 96.

to the convicts involved in the Robben Island rebellion.¹²⁰ The authorities sought to warn all convicts and slaves of what would befall them if they dared attempt similar challenges to the Company's authority. The authorities reaffirmed this warning by hanging the convicts' bodies at Lion's Rump alongside the partially decomposed corpses of two slaves who had been hung in March for leading a group of slave runaways.¹²¹

The sentences that were imposed, and the fact that the rebellion was recorded in the chronology of events on the Island in the convict rolls,¹²² suggest that Company officials regarded the plot in a very serious light insofar as it represented a direct threat to their authority. Not only in terms of the physical threat that it posed, but also in terms of what it implied about control and authority. Company officials believed that their position of authority at the Cape was precarious and they lived with the ever present, lingering fear of rebellion. Ironically much of this insecurity arose directly from the nature and complexities of the penal system that the Company itself had created. The harsh treatment that the soldiers inflicted on the convicts, and the soldiers' reliance on subordinates meant that the Company officials could never expect the threat of resistance to dissipate completely.

Although the convict rebellion demonstrated what was unusual and different about Robben Island, its inhabitants, and the course of action chosen by the latter, it also illustrated the manner in which the Island was, in many respects, a microcosm of the Cape. Many of the characteristic elements of the Cape were drawn into sharper relief in the smaller environment of the Island. As a site of banishment within the Company's realm, the Island was more isolated than the Cape, its Dutch minority far smaller, and its cosmopolitan inhabitants forced closer together.

The convicts on the Island embodied the manner in which Robben Island and the Cape were inextricably woven into the VOC's realm inasmuch as they themselves were the links between the colonies and polities of the VOC empire. As a result of this exchange of knowledge and mixing of status and race, the conventional categories of colonial society were often obscured. Although there were strong similarities between the convicts on the Island and slaves at the Cape (which is not surprising considering that the categories of convict and slave were not always mutually exclusive), the convicts on Robben Island demonstrated that convict status was more fluid than that of slaves. Convicts were able to transcend the boundaries between freedom and bondage more easily and their status was not always determined by race.¹²³ Even though the Robben Island rebellion reveals a great deal about convicts in the VOC's system of forced migration, the further that one delves into the events surrounding the rebellion, the more questions seem to arise and it is clear that the important role played by convicts at the Cape, and within the VOC's colonial realm, requires further research.

120. R Ross, *Status and Respectability in the Cape Colony*, 18.

121. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 264.

122. CA CJ 3188, *Bandieten Rollen, 1728-1795*.

123. K Ward, 'The Bounds of Bondage', 276.