

The Irony of Savagery in Nathaniel's Nutmeg

Nathaniel's Nutmeg, a historical monograph by Giles Milton, is a comprehensive and mesmerizing analysis of the fierce battles between European nations in their Imperialist quest to dominate and control the trade of the Spice Islands.¹ Although the ultimate purpose of Milton's lengthy examination of these events is meant to reveal the historic significance of the treaty that gave the British control of Manhattan, another major theme of immense importance was reverberated throughout the book. Milton succeeds in illuminating the ruthlessness and brutality that was employed in the European struggle to monopolize the spice trade. The Europeans continually justified their cruel and merciless actions towards the inhabitants of these tiny and remote islands by alluding to them as "savage" and "barbaric" populations. There is a remarkable amount of irony to be seen in this rationalization for the actions of the Dutch in this particular case, are tremendously appalling and can be argued, actually showcase savagery in its purest form. This contradiction is further illuminated by the attention given to the atrocious actions towards rival Europeans, namely the English, by the Dutch as depicted by Milton in *Nathaniel's Nutmeg*.

As the European nations fought ruthlessly to gain a monopoly in the spice trade, the expansion into unknown realms of the world was inherently dangerous, and the explorers who dared to take on such a risk had to be callous in nature in order to survive in these foreign environments in which they had limited resources and virtually no backup.² The Imperialist strategy of establishing trade centers to exploit and dominate parts of the world that did not belong to them for economic and political reasons

¹ Giles Milton, *Nathaniel's Nutmeg* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

² David R. Ringrose, *Expansion and Global Interaction 1200-1700* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2001), 148.

inevitably led to conflict within the nations they sought to control.³ Milton's study enforces the relevance of these motivations and the ensuing consequences of taking such a risk. As the European's raced to find faster and alternative routes to the elusive Spice Islands, they were continually in contact with unfamiliar populations that instilled fear and uncertainty within the minds of the adventurers whom frankly, had enough trouble simply trying to stay alive amidst the dangers of harsh climates and foreign diseases.⁴ The addition of tales told of cannibals, head-hunters and blood-thirsty savages along the way certainly would have contributed to their troubled mindset, yet the lure of wealth far exceeded any fear that they surely must have felt.⁵ As Milton proves, these were highly motivated individuals who could not be dissuaded from their mission, and would go to any lengths to achieve their goals.

As Milton described, the Dutch pursued their goals with a level of brutality that often shocked their own countrymen.⁶ This is not to marginalize the roles of other European nations, for many, if not all, have been guilty to some degree of using violence and inhumane means to acquire what they wanted. However, it is apparent throughout *Nathaniel's Nutmeg* that in this particular snippet of history the Dutch stand out in their excessive ruthlessness and disregard of humanity in their quest for control. Time and time again, Milton spoke of torture and mindless killings of native inhabitants that the Dutch came in contact with. For instance, when the Dutch arrived at the port of Bantam in Java, they were infuriated to find the prices for spices had skyrocketed, and thus proceeded to employ a campaign of destruction in which they destroyed much of the town and killed

³ Craig, Albert M. and others, *The Heritage of World Civilizations Volume Two: Since 1500*, 7th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education Inc., 2006), 873.

⁴ Milton, 6.

⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁶ Ibid, 8.

many of the natives.⁷ To be fair, it was not all of the Dutch that approved of such methods, however it was the leaders of these expeditions that ordered such attacks. This led one Dutch explorer to contemplate the situation he found himself in by stating in his journal, "There was nothing missing and everything was perfect, except what was wrong with ourselves."⁸ Unfortunately, it was not the mindset of such man as this one that reigned throughout the spice wars. It was the barbaric methods enforced by the greedy, blood-thirsty merchants that prevailed.

One island after another was decimated and its people massacred. Many natives did indeed fight ferociously to defend their land, their people, and their goods. Many in fact succeeded at times, only to be ultimately taken down by the guns and other superior technologies the explorer's had. However, it was not always in the best interest of the Dutch to kill the native population. They learned that they could use alcohol to form alliances; apparently the Indians were happy drunks.⁹ On the other hand, if the natives knew what the future would bring by forming these false relations with the Dutch, it is certain they would not have been as amicable. As soon as the native people posed any kind of threat or obstruction, they were considered mortal enemies and an immediate campaign was launched to kill their leaders, subjugate the masses, and drive them out of their land.¹⁰ Various methods of humiliation and torture for which there was no true justification were the norm. Many natives were fierce warriors, and often waged attacks employing brutal tactics, however, it must be put into context for it was indeed their land, their people, and their goods that were being so ruthlessly dealt with. However, it is true

⁷ Ibid, 61.

⁸ Ibid, 61.

⁹ Ibid, 181.

¹⁰ Ibid, 270.

that not all of the natives were genuine or had the best interest of their people in mind, for corruption was also present among some in East Asia. On the other hand, it was a battle of survival, and it is the innocent lives that were lost that illuminate the Dutch explorer's savage role in this instance of history throughout *Nathaniel's Nutmeg*.

The Dutch explorer's horrific actions, however, were not only confined to the native populations of the Spice Island's. As Milton went to great lengths to show, the brutality they exhibited was often extended towards fellow Europeans for the competition was fierce, and violence was inevitable as the explorers fought to gain control over the monopolization of the spice trade. This was most adamantly portrayed in the battles between the Dutch and the English as they struggled to acquire the full rights to trade in the Banda Islands. The Dutch employed methods of torture and terror upon their English rivals in order to gain power and control, breaking the Treaty of Defense in order to satisfy the greedy wishes of the individual explorers.¹¹ In order to finally banish the English from the islands, a systematic massacre of every Englishman in Amboyna took place.¹²

The Dutch justified their actions by insinuating that the English and the Japanese had conspired together to attack them.¹³ Torture by water and fire left the English grotesquely deformed, and were left chained up while their wounds putrefied, before they were finally executed a week later by being beheaded.¹⁴ The fact that the English were fellow Christians displayed the incomprehensible level of savagery with which the Dutch used to acquire what they wanted. The justification could no longer lie in the attitude that

¹¹ Ibid, 311.

¹² Ibid, 321.

¹³ Ibid, 325.

¹⁴ Ibid, 328-329.

these were people of an inferior race, these were fellow European's. The sole motivation was that of greed and the lure of power and recognition. The atrocities that were committed are almost the beyond the scope of comprehension, and illuminates the truth that they, were indeed as savage and barbaric as they could claim anyone to be.

Thus, the historical discussion in *Nathaniel's Nutmeg* achieves more than the ultimate intent of Milton in displaying the events that led to the Treaty of Breda that left the island of Run in the hands of the Dutch, and sealed the fate of New York in the hands of the English.¹⁵ Milton succeeds, though perhaps not intentionally, to display through the tremendous amount of violence involved within the race to monopolize the trade of the Spice Islands, the barbaric and savage methods that were employed by many Europeans, most notably in this instance by the Dutch. The irony lays in the fact that it was in fact these traits that were commonly used as justification by the explorers for the inhumane treatment of the natives they encountered, by claiming superiority over an inferior race of people. However, the actions of the Dutch unequivocally showcase the contradiction in this argument in their savage treatment of rival Europeans, of whom they did not spare their atrocious tactics of torture, massacre and overall brutality. *Nathaniel's Nutmeg* contributes to the evidences throughout history of such actions that inevitably inhabit human nature when greed, competition, and power struggles are present.

¹⁵ Ibid, 363.

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