Introduction

The disappearance of seascapes in the way Westerners view Southeast Asia is more than a curiosity of maps. It is symptomatic of the general invisibility and underestimation of the region’s maritime side.

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1.1. On Writing of the Spice Trade

The impact of the trade in Indonesian spices between 1450 and 1700 on global and, more particularly, European history is universally acknowledged. Its importance is reflected in the amount of scholarly attention paid to the details and consequences of European involvement (e.g., Glamann 1958; Tiele 1877–1887). But until the work of Van Leur (1955), despite the substantial literature (especially in Dutch) and the many carefully produced and annotated editions of the voyages of early European travelers, little attention had been given to the role of the Asians in all of this, or to the indigenous worlds that were the context for the rise of the Dutch East India Company as a power in the region (Van Leur 1955:153). Archives were read as documents for the study of European history, systematically either eliminating references that shed light on local social arrangements or mentioning them only when relevant to understanding the consequences of events in which Europeans were involved. Thus, as Warren (1979:224), pointed out, speaking of the Sulu region, the “expansion of external trade and the growing incidence of slave-raiding have claimed the attention of most historians only when those social forces collided with or were affected by European policy” (italics added).

But Van Leur’s eloquent attack on orthodox colonial historiography altered the course of studies of the spice trade and shifted European historical scholarship of Asia from colonial and orientalist preoccupations to a postcolonial, sociological, and altogether more detached view. This sea-change in vision instigated by Van Leur was followed by a series of major studies, the most important of which were those of Meilink-Roelofsz (1962) and Resink (1968). For Meilink-Roelofsz (1962:8), Asian trade was not predominantly small-scale peddling, as had been suggested by Van Leur, but a mixture. It involved local rulers, aristocracy, native commercial groups,
officials, and foreign merchants, as well as hawkers or itinerant traders, who depended on the “financiers” or “harbor princes.” It involved bulk goods such as rice, dried fish, and salt in addition to valuables; it was systematic and flexible rather than anarchic. Nowadays, we recognize its complex and multifaceted character.

By comparison, Resink’s contribution was, in an impressive series of papers published in the 1950s and early 1960s (1968), to observe that the character of political relations between the Netherlands and the Indies led to a regiocentric (“regiocentrische”) view of Indonesian history, one focused on those dominant polities with which the Dutch had dealings, and one that fostered the independent power of most of the outer islands until well into the colonial period. In many cases, the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, hereafter abbreviated to VOC), and after 1800, the government of the Dutch East Indies, was dealing with foreign relations rather than internal administration until about 1910: a world in which there was no Netherlands Indies, but only Dutch Java, Dutch Amboina, and so on, and alongside that a whole autonomous island world of “undiminished vigour” (Smail 1961:87). Now, this view has much to commend it, and I shall be returning to some of its implications later in this book. It is, of course, a polemical assertion to redress a hopeless balance and from an economic and social viewpoint is incorrect. In places, the VOC completely transformed existing social structures; elsewhere it simply dictated the terms of trade. The great merit of Resink’s reinterpretation is simply that it forced historians to break through the barrier of the prevailing preoccupation with the colonial relationship (ibid., 91).

All of this was the happy precursor to a new Indonesian national historiography and to a small number of key monographical studies. But although Van Leur and his successors (such as Warren [1979, 1981]) certainly accorded the peoples of the Indies and their indigenous trading zones center stage in the scholarship of the spice trade, they had still to come to terms with the study of the Moluccan islands in particular, as parts of local systems of production, exchange, and consumption. The emphasis remained on long-distance trade, and on the role of intrusive (albeit Asiatic) traders; native Moluccans largely appear simply as suppliers of spices, despite the fact that they provided the ultimate conditions for both the trade and the scholarly edifice that historians have subsequently erected. There is more concern with understanding the economy and society of Malacca or Majapahit—even Srivijaya—than in reconstructing and understanding the social and economic organization of those Moluccans actually engaged in the production and exchange of cloves and nutmeg. Van Leur, then, had left his task incomplete. He had managed to shift from a Eurocentric focus to an Asiacentric one, but had no apparent interest in a production-end account. Though the international spice trade was, ultimately, dependent on complex local trading networks, these were, to a large extent, treated as a black box in the writing of a hegemonic history.
This study seeks, at least in part, to redress the balance, to provide what Resink might have called a “Moluccocentric view.” However, I do not claim to offer a full examination of the historical material for particular periods or polities, nor a systematic analysis of original documents in the VOC archive for Amboina and Banda. Indeed, the use of, mainly, nineteenth-century colonial archives simply supplements the existing literature. Nor do I attempt to engage with the worldview of early Moluccans. All these things are best left to the historians (see, e.g., Abdurachman 1981, Andaya 1993, Manusama 1977, Villiers 1990), though there is much left to be done. My aim is to focus an anthropological lens on the dynamics of trade in just one area, as the facts are available to us from the main published sources and through the direct and circumstantial data of ethnography. My earlier work (e.g., Ellen 1979) had already indicated that the growing, harvesting, and trade of spices for export was intricately related to the dynamics of local trading areas. These trading areas linked food-deficient political centers of clove or nutmeg production with vast mainland and insular peripheries providing staple carbohydrates and forest products. Thus, the localized occurrence of a single aromatic plant, valued in international trade, drastically changed the economic and social life of the indigenous people. In many areas subsistence economies based on swidden cultivation of root crops and the extraction of sago were transformed by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries into plantation economies producing for distant markets. By the early seventeenth century there were three major trading systems focused on each of Ternate/Tidore, Ambon, and Banda. In the chapters that follow I provide the detailed evidence for the existence of one of these, the Banda zone, and its localized component networks; outline its major transformations since 1500; and attempt to explain what I regard as an intriguing persistence over at least a period of five hundred years.

A large part of my argument rests, however, not on the ability to detect general patterns and tendencies so much as on the focused investigation of one traditional zone: a zone I shall call here Geser-Gorom or (archipelagic) Southeast Seram. This zone encompasses the small group of islands off the extreme southeastern tip of the island of Seram. If geopolitical events had conspired differently, these islands might have been a center of the first order, along with, say, Ternate. Although circumstances did not so conspire, these same islands nevertheless became a vital secondary link in that system focused on Banda. Unlike Ternate, Tidore, Ambon, and Banda, Geser-Gorom never became a major pin in a constructed colonial economy, and although the trade in spices depended on its existence, it rarely receives a mention in major historical accounts. But for this same reason, its indigenous trading history is more accessible. By explicating the social organization of trade in these islands, I hope to shed light on the general organization of indigenous trade and its relation to the ecology of production and political process, and to understand something of the transfor-
mation of local subsistence economies into a key component in a global system of exchange.

1.2. The Early History of Nutmeg and Clove Production

The ancient history of the spice trade has been rehearsed many times, though it is only in recent years that we have been able to place it in a more encompassing archaeological and anthropological context. It is now accepted that by the beginning of the third millennium B.C. substantial improvements had been made in maritime technology, which permitted the emergence of not only interconnecting localized exchange networks in Indonesia of some complexity (appropriately modeled on Melanesian reciprocal exchange cycles), but also regular long-distance trade in outrigger canoes and plank-built boats. On the basis of current evidence it is reasonable to link this to the expansion of pottery use, agriculture, and the distribution of Austronesian-speaking peoples throughout island Southeast Asia between 4500 and 3500 B.P. (Bellwood 1985: chap. 7; Ellen and Glover 1979; Glover 1989:2, 12). It is, in addition, fair to assume that by 3000–1800 B.P., a period that saw the development of iron use, the development of wet rice cultivation, and increased social ranking in western Indonesia, there had also been an accompanying expansion of a complex and powerful mercantile system into the eastern part of the archipelago (Glover 1979:180–181). There is evidence of a movement of crop distribution westward from New Guinea: sugarcane (*Saccharum officinarum*), for example, had probably been domesticated in New Guinea by 5000 B.P. Obsidian dated to 3000–2000 B.P., originating from western New Britain, has been found as far west as Sabah (Swadling 1996:52–53); and before 2000 B.P. metal, glass, and, bronze artifacts provide evidence of eastward trade along the lesser Sundas. We can probably also assume that bird of paradise plumes were being traded out of New Guinea via the Onin coast of New Guinea from the same period, along with the aromatic bark of massoi, *Cryptocarya massoy*, (ibid., 136, Spriggs 1998b: 934–935).

At what point spices became a catalyst in this configuration is not so clear, though by A.D. 300 cloves, nutmeg, and sandalwood seem to have replaced whatever commodity previously dominated westward trade between what Swadling (1996:53, 59) described as “outer Southeast Asia” and mainland Asia. Whether the main commodity replaced was feathers (as Swadling suggested) is almost impossible to confirm. We have uncertain archaeological evidence of cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*) from Terqua in Mesopotamia dated to around 1700 B.C. (Spriggs 1998a:58–60) and literary evidence from Rome and China for its medicinal uses (Andaya 1993:1–2). It has also been long suggested that nutmeg (the seed) and mace (the seed aril) of *Myristica fragrans* had reached the Mediterranean basin from the second millennium B.C. (Warburg 1897:1–2; see also Miller 1969:60),
though the evidence here is also controversial. We can be more certain that there had been Chinese contact with the Moluccas from at least the first millennium B.C. (Rockhill 1915). Indeed, the word for nutmeg in most Indonesian languages is a cognate of pala, from Sanskrit “phala” (fruit), via Malay. This is a common pattern of lexical replacement, where local products become important trade goods and synonymous with wealth (Chlenov 1980:433, 437). The Moluccas are mentioned also in Tang dynasty sources (A.D. 618–906) (Groenevelt 1960:117), and Chau Ju-Kua of 1225 recorded that the area that later became known to Westerners as the “spice islands” produced cloves, nutmeg, laka wood, and tortoiseshell, which were traded via Java and Sumatra to China. In exchange, the producers—or at least their local middlemen—received such commodities as porcelain, silk, fermented liquor, and coarse salt (Rockhill 1915; Wheatley 1959). By the twelfth century, when spices of Southeast Asian origin (particularly pepper) had become important commodities in Europe, the Chinese were already importing them in considerable quantities. From that time we know that the redistribution of cloves and nutmeg from the Moluccas was controlled by the rulers of eastern Java, which in turn allowed them to foster the pepper trade. By the fourteenth century this control was so complete that even the indomitable Chinese were compelled (through Javanese competition) to buy spices indirectly in Javanese ports (Schrieke 1955:25), rather than using the cross-route mentioned first in the Shun Feng Hsiang Sung nautical compendium of 1430, which led from Mindanao to “Mei-lu-chû,” the Moluccas (Mills 1970:182). By the fifteenth century, according to Pires (1515; see Cortasão 1944), cloves and nutmeg were definitely being planted in the Moluccas and not just harvested.

What is significant about these scraps of evidence is not so much that they show how Moluccan spices were seeping out to great civilizations many thousands of miles distant and from a very early time. It is rather that they indicate social relations of trade consistent with the view that the global system began long before the conventional 1500 threshold often used to define the beginning of the modern world, even if the features of capital accumulation found in archaic systems differed from what followed (Gills and Frank 1993:4–5). I do not here want to test the hypothesis of “ceaseless capital accumulation” as it might apply before 1500. If we follow Gills and Frank (ibid., 7), capital accumulation in spice production was evident from infrastructural investment in establishing spice groves, shipbuilding, and social institutions promoting trade (including local trade). But it is curious that even though these authors noted the neglect of Southeast Asia in studies of the emerging world system, they did not really pay much attention to it themselves (ibid., cf. 17, 178).

No doubt the earliest form of clove and nutmeg trade from the places of their original production was simply in terms of slow movement from island to island, between local trading zone and local trading zone. For the
most part, intrusive outsiders only come into an area once demand has risen sufficiently (for whatever reason) to merit the undertaking, with all its attendant risks. So, in other words, although we may agree with Polanyi (1975:154) that, “throughout, the external origin of trade is conspicuous” and that “internal trade is largely a derivation of earlier external trade,” long-distance trade always presupposes the prior existence of already complex local trading networks; there is always some preexisting system. Looked at this way, we have to reexamine notions of “embeddedness” of economies and our view of trade in such societies as directed only at prestige, conspicuous consumption, and the maintenance of alliances, and be more prepared to dispense with conventional distinctions between market and nonmarket economies (Ekholm and Friedman 1993:59). What local patterns develop depends much upon the regional dimension of the larger system. The center of such systems need not be a single political unit and more often tends to consist of a number of competing/exchanging political units, one of which may exercise hegemony within the center (see Figure 1.1). For Ekholm and Friedman (ibid., 63), “Center periphery structures are unstable because of (the) vulnerability of centers in the external (supply/market) realm which is so difficult to control,” and the “development
of total systems is not equivalent to the development of individual societies.” “Dense trade networks,” they argued, “correspond to competition centers... sparse networks correspond to hierarchical territorial structures” (ibid., 69). What evidence we have for coastal New Guinea (see section 1.3) suggests that fragmentation of larger political structures accompanies increasing density of trade. In the Moluccan context it is instructive to compare the more hierarchical structure of the Tidore zone of political influence and trade with the more devolved structure of Geser-Gorom and the historical tension set up between the two. As I shall demonstrate in subsequent chapters, this model is strikingly appropriate to the situation that we find over several hundred years for the trading polities of the Moluccas in general and to the Geser-Gorom Archipelago in particular.

1.3. Moluccan Trade in the World System

Kenneth Hall (1985), employing the ideas of Immanuel Wallerstein (1979), has summarized the changes that took place in the Euroasiatic trading sphere between the fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries, when a new pattern of world trade emerged linking Asia and Europe. Two political developments provided the conditions for this. First, the establishment of the Mameluke dynasty in Egypt (1345) stabilized the Red Sea maritime passage to the Mediterranean; second, the beginning of the Ming dynasty in China (1368) launched an upswing in demand for new Southeast Asian products (such as pepper, tin, and spices) and led to the emergence of new entrepôts on the North Sumatra coast and in the Moluccas as the source of these commodities. In Hall’s (1985:222–223) view, no longer was there a dominant “center,” but instead “each zone along with the interconnected sea-route from China to western Europe became important to the whole system.” With serial coinvolvement of Chinese, Javanese, Indian, and eventually Italian traders, the “long voyages...[to] faraway markets” were transformed into consecutive smaller voyages. In other words, the relationship between distance and the organization of trade underwent a significant alteration: the single voyage across the entire breadth of the Indian Ocean, with its considerable transaction costs, gave way to shorter, “segmented,” voyages between a number of large port cities situated at the “circumference of the maximum navigational circle” (Chaudhuri 1985:37–39), the so-called “triple segmentation” with its loci at Malacca, Cambay, and Aden (ibid., 40). These places Chaudhuri described as “emporia,” by which he seems to mean more than Polanyi’s “port of trade” (ibid., 224). In this world we find many zones of trade dominated by a few seafaring people who sought profit from the transport of goods in each zone, forming complex “trading diasporas” (Cohen 1971:267), not simply merchants but cross-cultural brokers (Curtin 1984). “The dominant ports in each trade zone,” argued Hall (1985:223), “become the chief distributors of foreign
goods in their region as well as the source of local products for traders from
another zone.” In this manner the people in the hinterlands, at least in the
maritime realm of Southeast Asia, “were brought into contact with the out-
side world via such dominant ports, and they entered into the mainstream
of regional history . . . after being left on the periphery through most of the
premodern age.” The Indian subcontinent emerged from all this as a core
production area of cotton textiles in the world economy, and it was Indian
textiles, handled exclusively by Indian and Arab merchants until the
arrival in the sixteenth century of the Europeans, that formed the staple
commodity of trade with Southeast Asia (Sen 1962:93).

Hall (1985:223–225) identified at least six zones of trade through which
goods from China passed on their way to northeastern Europe, focused on
southern China, island Southeast Asia, coastal India and Sri Lanka, Alexan-
dria and the Near East, and a zone covering the western Mediterranean and
northern Europe, controlled by Italian traders. For a variation on this
theme see the eight “circuits” of the thirteenth-century world system in
Gills and Frank (1993: fig. 9.4; see also Meilink-Roelofsz 1962; Wallerstein
1979) or the “triple segmentation” of the Indian Ocean described by
Chauduri (1985:104), and mentioned earlier in this section. Although we
may not agree with Hall (1985:228) that this pattern of trade completely
replaced “loose federations of port towns” with states having a single dom-
inant port in the western part of archipelagic Southeast Asia, such states
certainly arose.

In the Moluccas, by comparison, “loose federations” seem to have per-
sisted, without the growth of large centralized polities, encouraged by the
absence of vast forested interiors where access could be denied by control-
ling the mouths of the large rivers that were their arteries, where “centers”
were smaller and power more diffuse, though trade was every bit as signifi-
cant in articulating the social system as it had become along the Strait of
Malacca. In the central Moluccas trade was not organized through centers
of the kind described by Hall. The Banda Islands were certainly an impor-
tant—indeed the most important—central place, over many hundreds of
years, articulating trade over a vast area; but Banda was was not a state, and
neither were its composite polities. Moreover, it never claimed territory or
exercised conventional political control over people and resources beyond
Banda itself. By contrast, there must have been many “nodal” points of
trade—more a plurality of shifting centers. To the north, Ternate and
Tidore claimed territory and allegiance at the time of European contact,
but by then they had adopted a Muslim western Indonesian conception of
statecraft, and it is difficult to reconstruct now what preceded it. Moreover,
before the sixteenth century, there were no towns, markets, or trading cen-
ters as we would normally understand them in the Moluccas. As Polanyi
long ago demonstrated, trade does not necessarily require marketplaces for
its conduct, even when marketing occurs on a significant scale. For pre-
Muslim models we must turn rather to Melanesia, or even Africa. Thus,
Northrup (1978:4–5), writing as a historian but taking his critical cue from a generation of anthropologists writing on acephalous and weakly centralized political systems in Africa, noted that there has been a prejudice against accepting that small-scale nonstate societies might be “quite capable of participating in cultural and economic systems much larger than their political units,” observing that “there is then no necessary correlation between large-scale trade and large-scale political institutions.”

It is, however, with Melanesia that some of the parallels become really compelling. The extensive sea trade in sago, the role of small offshore islands (often atolls) as crucial nodes in wider trading networks, arguably chosen for defensive purposes (because manpower must have been short in the absence of traders), central places as manufacturing sites, and trading zones as specialized divisions of labor are all discussed for Melanesian localities, in ways that fit well with the Moluccan evidence. Some key studies in this literature focus on Motupore (Allen 1977a, b); Mailu (Irwin 1974, 1978a, b); the Torres Strait islands (Harris 1979); the Trobriands, the Amphletts, and other islands in the Kula area (Malinowski 1922; Irwin 1983; Lauer 1970); Manus and the Admiralty Archipelago (Kennedy 1981; Schwartz 1963); and Siassi in the Vitiaz Strait (Harding 1967:241); some of the general features are discussed by Brookfield and Hart (1971:314–334) and Sahlins (1972). All indicate parallels with Moluccan networks, and provide tempting models for reconstructing Moluccan systems as they existed before incorporation into dominant global relations. The systems of which these small islands are part integrate ecologically and culturally separate communities in the distinctive absence of any political institutions of comparable extent. Almost incidentally, such parallels between the Moluccan and the Melanesian situation illustrate how scholarly anthropological traditions embedded in particular political histories, the Melanesianist facing east toward the Pacific and the Indonesianist facing west toward mainland Asia, have prevented such obvious similarities from being recognized and addressed hitherto (Urry 1981).

None of this, of course, detracts in any way from the more general observation made by Hall (1981:37), that the development of trade of a particular kind in the Indonesian Archipelago in the pre-European age is contrary to the claims of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century historians, namely that there were no elements of Western capitalism in Southeast Asia before the sixteenth century. Hall was able to show a widespread preoccupation with trade and commerce linked to an emergent cosmopolitan and urban sector, noting that early European records of their experiences in Southeast Asia are on the whole perceptive of local culture and society, attempting to understand it on its own terms; by the nineteenth century historiography was more concerned with molding Southeast Asia’s history to fit a preconceived image of what Europeans thought it should be, expecting to prove, as it were, that Southeast Asians had accomplished nothing over time except when foreigners had imposed themselves
and provided direction to otherwise hapless native populations (cf. Alatas 1977). In this ethnocentric vision, Indians and Chinese helped Southeast Asians to become civilized in earliest times, but from the sixteenth century onward it was Europe’s turn by introducing the capitalist economic and social order. We now know that “from a Southeast Asian perspective the coming of the Europeans contributed to the demise of a developing Southeast Asian commercial class, but this demise was not due entirely to European initiatives” (Hall 1981:37–38). Later, of course, Europeans actively destroyed, directly or through emasculation, industrial and commercial infrastructures (see Reid 1993, especially 267–330).

1.4. The Moluccan Trading Zones and Their Creation

I have, in a series of earlier publications (Ellen 1979, 1984, 1987), presented evidence for the existence of three reasonably distinct trading nexuses located in the present-day Indonesian province of Maluku (the Moluccas) and adjacent areas of the New Guinea coast (Figure 1.2), as these existed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They have persisted, in a modified form, up to and including the present day and display certain properties that allow us theoretically to specify them as “systems.” Each “zone” (in Warren’s sense [1998:16] a “borderless world”) is focused on a densely populated spice-producing center, dependent upon an extensive sago-producing periphery. This periphery also provided the center with a wide range of forest and marine products, which (together with the sago) were exchanged for imported calico, valuables, and rice. The most northerly zone was focused on Ternate and Tidore, drawing on the resources of Halmahera and elsewhere; a central zone was focused on Ambon-Lease, drawing for resources on Seram and Buru; and a southerly zone was focused on Banda, drawing on resources from a wide arc, including Southeast Seram, the Kei Islands, Aru, and parts of New Guinea. These trading nexuses did not all emerge at the same time, and the conditions of their emergence were in each case significantly different. However, by the early part of the seventeenth century their simultaneous existence is quite well documented, and the consequences of the interaction of external factors with their internal dynamics are evident over the subsequent three-hundred-year period.

Over the course of several hundred years, relatively independent local populations were absorbed into more extensive and complex modes of production and exchange, through local polities, petty states, European

Figure 1.2. (Opposite) Schematic outline of nesting Moluccan trading spheres. The legend takes the form of the accompanying hypothetical taxonomy. Reproduced, with modification, from Ellen (1987).
NEW GUINEA

TIMOR

LONG DISTANCE

1. Moluccas - Sulawesi - Java - Nusa Tenggara

REGIONAL

2. Banda - East Seram - South West New Guinea

INTERMEDIATE

6. Kei
7. Geser - East Seram
8. Banda
5. Aru
9. Geser - Seram Laut
10. Gorom Group

LOCAL

11. Piru Bay
12. Amahai - Elpaputh Bay
hegemony, and finally total colonial control. Historically, this process began in the northern Moluccas and Banda, and later spread to the central Moluccas. Sago subsistence both permitted the rapid growth of spice production and prevented the immediate negative economic consequences that are usually associated with a rapid expansion of agricultural production for exchange of crops with no local subsistence value. The communities were able to tolerate the wide and erratic fluctuations in spice production and sales. Paradoxically, it was precisely sago dependence, plus external pressures, that maintained and increased the rate of expansion of spice production in some localities so that an initially adaptive pattern finally proved inadequate. On the small islands heavily involved in spice production, the system adjusted to the depletion of traditional subsistence resources by importing food, particularly sago, from other islands that were less involved directly in the spice trade. However, this made the communities even more dependent on spice production, although they were partly cushioned against total dependence through the possibility of paying for food in locally produced commodities rather than imported items. In this way, specialized local systems were incorporated into a much more specialized regional system with a geographical as well as a social division of labor. Contemporary patterns of local trade and production cannot be understood except in relation to this progressive ecological and economic change.

The islands off Southeast Seram were, for most of the period of European influence and control in Asia, at the far reaches of empire and yet paradoxically, as I try to show in this book, were crucial parts of the colonial system. The Banda group, for example, could not have become a significant center without the trading linkages it maintained to the east and northeast, to Geser-Gorom. It is true that this area was subject to periodic VOC punitive expeditions, first because of the threat the islanders posed to the Dutch monopoly and later because of alleged piracy, but they continued to act independently in most economic and political matters for almost five hundred years after the arrival of the first Europeans. Although the Dutch maintained the fiction that they were part of the Indies, they were not effectively incorporated within it until the late nineteenth century, with the establishment of a small garrison at Geser. Even the increasingly frequent visits by administrators in the first half of the nineteenth century were, for the protagonists, more like official contacts between friendly states. Of course, the domains of Southeast Seram had to operate within a system that had been transformed by a Dutch presence and by the vicissitudes of the world system; but even in the nineteenth century there was no attempt to control their means of production. When political control finally came, warfare decreased and many of the rulers became impotent, but trading went on much as before. There were thus shifts in the levels of control, between the political and the economic, and although not independent in any ultimate sense, the levels had a remarkable degree of autonomy. Thus, many Southeast Seram boats sailed under the Dutch flag
during much of the nineteenth century, but for many this was no more than a flag of convenience, which enabled them to call on Dutch help if they got into trouble. The political control that the Dutch exercised in Southeast Seram was not capitalistic in the sense of operating through the control of market forces, labor, or goods. Certainly the dynamic of the VOC had been capitalistic, but in the context of the Indies the VOC operated like any other of the Asian potentates it sought to displace, exacting tribute and punishing those who declined to pay it. The VOC differed from those potentates in its technical mastery and in its control of the means of production of particular products that it saw as vital to its interests.

1.5. Persistence and Emergent Change

The systemic properties of trading zones and networks in the Moluccas have arisen from a combination of environmental, technological, economic, and political forces. Technological changes in transport have meant that trading routes are no longer constrained by the necessity to use sailing vessels. The economic forces that have destroyed or concealed obvious systemic properties are in terms of both imports and exports. On the import side, the accessibility of a wide range of cheap manufactured goods through improved long-distance trade has killed off much local trade and local productive specialization. Radial routes are now emphasized at the expense of lateral ones, lessening the overall connectedness of the networks on the periphery. The availability of imported rice in the center has led to a decline in the local trade of other starch staples, and local pottery is being replaced by plastic and metal alternatives. Even cheap vegetables and roots brought in from Java and Sulawesi are undermining local trade. In short, the economy is showing all the classic symptoms of a familiar form of underdevelopment. Increasing economic centralization has been accompanied by political centralization. Administrative pressures have encouraged the use of particular trade routes. Remote populations on the periphery (Nila, Teun, Serua) have been forced to move nearer the centers and inland mountain villages to the coasts of the larger islands.

The export trade in spices is also changing. The Moluccas as a whole are less important for the production of nutmeg and cloves than they used to be. Although by the 1980s cloves were being planted more widely in the Moluccas, on the periphery as well as at the centers, cloves and nutmeg were also increasingly being grown in other parts of Indonesia. Clove trees, however, were being planted at the expense of nutmeg, because the prices obtainable per kilogram were higher. Thus, although nutmeg used to be the exclusive cash crop in Gorom, after 1950 clove production gradually outstripped the production of nutmeg. By the late 1980s, however, overproduction of cloves had led to a slump in the price and real problems for producers.

The exchange of sago, slaves, and forest products that maintained
Banda at the center of its own trading nexus had virtually disappeared by the 1980s, and the traditional links in the system had been severed. The production of nutmeg and its relative market price had declined. The colonial perkenier system ended with World War II, and the estates declined further under Indonesian nationalization. Butonese replaced Buginese ship handlers. Today, Banda has become more of a trading base than a major center of production, occupying an increasingly more marginal position, ironically more a center for a peddling trade than it has been for five hundred years, with landless peasants relying on selling small quantities of nutmeg to monopolistic government corporations, or trading dried fish, *Trochus* shell, cloves, cinnamon, and kenari nuts (*Canarium commune*) to private merchants, mostly destined for the Ambon market. Despite improvements in communications, Banda has remained poorly placed to supply the Ambon market with its most abundant resource, fresh fish. But even with these changes it is still possible to discern systemic properties in the Banda zone. This is partly because Banda is so deficient in many products that it needs (timber, thatch, coconut), which can still be obtained most easily from Southeast Seram and other points east. It is also partly because Banda still maintains its role as a base and pivot in the long-distance sailing trade. It lies in an advantageous geographical position and provides excellent harbor facilities.

But if the wider Banda system shows signs of disappearing, the local zones of which it is composed maintain a higher degree of systemness: the Kei Islands (focused on Tual and Elat), Aru (focused on Dobo), and, most strikingly, archipelagic Southeast Seram (focused on Geser). Here the classic features of the fish–sago–export product nexus remain intact and provide an excellent opportunity for the investigation of trading patterns that were once found more widely. Some of the features observable today are remarkably similar to those described by Van Leur for early Asian trade up to the seventeenth century. The maritime peddlers receive their capital from rich villagers, government officials, or from their families. The proceeds are distributed according to fixed proportions, and the trading party dissolves when an expedition is over. Relations with trading partners, however, are long-lasting, and enduring networks are maintained. The persistence of trading networks over long periods of time, in fact through several "world systems," speaks, however, for their relative autonomy, with the forms and customs of the peddling trade remaining stable over long periods of time (Evers 1988:91, 99).

1.6. The Structure of an Argument

Before proceeding further it is necessary to clarify some abstract concepts that are used in the course of the discussion that follows. Unfortunately, even the most basic of terms are not transparent, and there is still some
confusion in the literature about how the term “trading network” should be employed. Trading networks, as Evers (ibid., 92) put it, can be defined as “social processes of exchange ... [where] interaction takes place for the primary purpose of exchanging goods over more or less greater geographical distances.” This seems to me to be a reasonable start, but Evers (ibid., 93) then went on to list as intermediate trading systems in Southeast Asia the northern Strait of Malacca (Aceh), Riau-Singapore, the Buginese network, the Butonese network, Minangkabau petty trade, the Sulu network, networks of the Java Sea, and the Trengganu-Kelantan-Thai network. It is difficult to know what to make of this hodgepodge, because the examples given are not commensurate: some are defined in terms of ethnicity (corresponding presumably to Cohen’s [1971] “trading diaspora” [see also Fallers 1967 and Yambert 1981]), some in terms of objective measurable patterns of interaction, and others apparently more in terms of social relationships that exist in the ideal virtual world of the traders themselves. Of those defined geographically, most are very impressionistic. All in all, the list is reminiscent of Borges’ fictitious Chinese encyclopedia in which it is impossible to discern the logic on which its organization is predicated. Of course, in the end what a trading network is, how it is bounded, depends (as with an ecosystem or a society) on the problem at hand (Ellen 1984).

Another part of Evers’ definition concerns the purpose of trade: the exchange of goods. In the literal, interactionist, sense this is, of course, palpably true. But the statement requires unpacking and qualification. We know from a noble lineage of anthropological theory going back to Marcel Mauss and Bronislaw Malinowski that mundane exchange of material things may underwrite, disguise, or embellish complex forms of social integration; that it is “not absolutely necessary” for local productive forces but may be socially necessary to maintain group relations. This is evident when prestige goods needed for local transactions (bride-price and other services) and for defining individual social status are imported objects (Ekholm and Friedman 1993:61; Friedberg 1977). However, for the Moluccas, we need to modify such a generalization. Certainly, in large parts of the area (and well into the interior of New Guinea) exchange is not necessary to maintain productive forces but historically has become essential to the maintenance of ritual cycles and systems of inequality (Ellen 1988). The dependence on trade goods for sustaining ritual cycles in both the Moluccas and the westernmost part of New Guinea is richly documented by ethnography from the late nineteenth century onward (the role of imported porcelain, Indian and other textiles, elephant tusks, bronze gongs), and we can only assume that the pattern is one that goes back many centuries, if not millennia. In Tung Hsi Yang K’au book IV (Groenevelt 1960:117–118), for example, a source of 1618 noted that when a (Moluccan) girl marries they buy large quantities of Chinese cups, which they paint outside; rich people purchase many to show their wealth. But in Banda and archipelagic Southeast Seram trade became a crucial part of
maintaining the productive forces, especially important in an area with specialized modes of extraction and environmental constraints. It is about this that much of this book is concerned.

I discuss in chapter 7 some of the empirical difficulties in delineating networks and return to the general conceptual issue in chapter 10. My own use of the term “network,” as with the unqualified use of terms such as “center” and “periphery,” implies the existence of some concrete linkage between individuals or places measured in terms of flows of goods or voyages. The model outlined in section 4 of this chapter illustrates this well. I distinguish between the scale of trading networks (emphasizing connections) and zone (emphasizing areas), and their organization into structured local or regional systems. Scale is about distances, numbers and linkages, size of population, quantities of goods handled, and technological infrastructures, such as types of boats. Using these criteria, we can distinguish (a) local zones that are essentially coastal or within small island groups, (b) intermediate zones (those connecting local zones), (c) regional zones (as in the three zones focused on Ternate/Tidore, Ambon, and Banda, and (d) long-distance zones (as between the Moluccan centers and Java). These distinctions imply no particular kind of organization, and the boundaries between different zones at each level are empirically based, though the point of transition from one to the other must be arbitrary and defined in terms of the objectives of the analysis. Such a schematization does not rule out locally significant trading relations across the boundaries between spheres and is concerned rather with structural and statistical tendencies.

In the Moluccas local trading networks tend to be confined to single islands, small island groups, and stretches of coast and hinterland. In Figure 1.2, the Gorom (10), Banda (8), and Geser (9) networks clearly illustrate this level of organization. In each case, local imbalances in the production of various subsistence crops are usually evened out within the area circumscribed, with different villages often providing certain specialized services, such as pottery manufacture, iron working, or sago production. The degree to which these zones overlap varies and influences their systemic character. The Banda group maintains a high degree of closure in terms of local trade (mainly because of physical isolation), the Gorom group considerably less so. Zones that include stretches of coastline, because of continuous linear habitation, tend to overlap much more. Indeed, some settlements may best be portrayed as simultaneously belonging to two or more local networks with different foci.

At a more inclusive level, the central and southern Moluccan area can be seen as being composed of relatively discrete intermediate networks, at the hub of each of which is a small island (or number of small islands) serving as a redistributive center and point of articulation with the outside world. Thus, in Figure 1.2 West Seram (3) is focused on Ambon and the Lease Islands, Aru (5) on Dobo, Southeast Seram (7) on Geser, and so on.
The trading centers, or foci, show various degrees of dependency on their peripheries and are generally very small islands that appear to owe their importance to their geographical centrality in the local trading area and because they provide intrusive traders or refugees with good harbors and safe havens in otherwise hostile territory. Occasionally the reasons may have been environmental. For example, local inhabitants of Seram Rei claim that it was first inhabited to avoid the mangrove swamps along the southeastern coastline of Seram. But in this case one might ask why not settle at that point on the mainland where the mangroves end. The real reason is more complicated and is probably largely political and economic in character: that an island among banks and shoals provided ready access to desirable sea products, that land elsewhere was politically inaccessible, that anchorages were convenient and safe, and that Seram Rei lay in the immediate vicinity of what was already an important trading center (the Seram Laut archipelago). The reasons for settling on such small islands must have been strong because the disadvantages were often severe. Small islands such as Geser, Kiltai, and Seram Rei are flat, tiny, and exposed coral islets, subject to frequent flooding, vulnerable to tsunamis, with virtually no possibilities for cultivation and with only brackish drinking water. There is oral and written evidence, as well as that of contemporary administrative boundaries, that in the past local political domains rivaled for control of these small strategic islands (Kolff 1927 [1840]:287–288). Islands with so little natural wealth, with the possible exception of sea produce, must be contrasted with powerful political domains such as Kataloka on Gorom, which also exported locally grown spices and had opportunities for subsistence cultivation.

This play-off between precarious environmental conditions and supreme economic advantage does not apply only to minute islands whose entire livelihood depends on the transshipment, rather than production, of commodities. We have already mentioned that access to exotic sea produce may have been an important locational feature for some of the centers, at least since the eighteenth century (Urry 1980). The same is true for certain settlements on the periphery, either populated reefs vulnerable to storms (Garogos) or islands subject to seismic disturbances. Banda, for example, has had a continuous and violent history of volcanism (Hanna 1978), and much the same may be true of Ternate and Tidore. But in these cases, we are not only dealing with ideal centers for transshipment but also with primary locations for the production of nutmeg (Banda) and cloves (Ternate/Tidore).

Very small islands with no possibilities for cultivation are entirely dependent on the import of basic foods and materials: rice and manufactured goods from outside the Moluccas and other starch staples (largely sago), vegetables, fruit, and constructional and craft materials from other islands in the immediate vicinity. Such needs in a hypothetically pristine world might initially have been met through highly local trade, such as
between Geser and Seram Laut. Geser, Kiltai, and Seram Rei are still very dependent on the vegetable produce of nearby Seram Laut, and the economic significance of this island is reflected politically in the division between the polity of Kelu on Seram Rei and Kiltai. But long-term requirements for trade objects to exchange for rice and manufactured goods and the increasing scale of such trade and home consumption have led to the growth of a much larger periphery. In the case of Geser, Kiltai, and Seram Rei, it meant the incorporation of the eastern part of mainland Seram and parts of Teluk Berau and the Onin Peninsula of New Guinea.

More encompassing still than the intermediate networks are the regional systems. The three regional systems in the model were identified in section 1.4 (Ambon–West Seram, Ternate/Tidore–Halmahera, and Banda–East Seram). I confine myself here to the Banda system. This can be seen as comprising at least four separate and identifiable intermediate networks plus some less clearly attached networks. The four major intermediate-level components are the Banda, Kei, and Aru groups and the network connecting the Geser-Teor chain with the mainland of East Seram. The attachments are the New Guinea (Papuan) coast from Teluk Berau south-eastward to Mimika and the extreme southeastern islands focused on Tanimbar. The systemic properties of the Banda regional nexus derive almost entirely from intrusive long-distance trade. The incorporation of various intermediate networks has depended on the importance of their products outside the Moluccas and, to a lesser extent, demand elsewhere in the system. With the drop in external demand for their products, some intermediate (and local) networks regain something of their earlier autonomy. Thus, strong local subsystemic properties have continually threatened the integrity of the system as a whole.

Connected with this important structural difference between the Ambon and Banda systems is the question of distance and the most appropriate boat technology in each case. In the past the Ambon system could reproduce itself internally by relying on small coastal craft, but the Banda system involved major sea crossings. Historically, this has often meant the employment of much larger vessels, often (though not exclusively) those belonging to intrusive trading groups such as the Buginese and Butonese. This set of issues is examined further in chapter 6.

It would be a mistake, however, to see the emergence and transformation of trading patterns in the Moluccas as simply the working out of some game-theoretic or market rationality under ideal Von Thünen and Christaller-Lösch conditions. Trade relations within any network were always constrained as well as facilitated by other social relations, such as pela (intervillage) alliances in the Ambon–West Seram zone or their functional equivalents in Southeast Seram (the tutu and seri-tahun confederations), marital alliances, and ties of political subordination and control. Although it is difficult at this stage to do much more than speculate regarding the political organization of trade before the European period, the
larger systems clearly brought together political entities of very different kinds: semidependent tribal groups (such as the Nuaulu), slave-based domains with chiefs or rajas (such as Kataloka), the sultanates of Ternate and Tidore, and the local “republics” of Banda. From the seventeenth century onward, the number of different kinds of political entity and modes of production increased to include estates run by the Dutch East India Company (Banda) and mercantilist control of peasant producers (Ambon group). It is quite clear that the Dutch period resulted not simply in changes in traditional trading patterns, but in some cases in their consolidation and the accentuation of some of their more distinctive properties. Thus, the geographical division of resources in the Banda Archipelago after 1621 was administratively redefined: firewood could only be taken from the volcanic island of Gunung Api, and it was mandatory that vegetable gardens and nutmeg groves be located in different places. Clove cultivation was prohibited in large parts of Seram (e.g., the Hoamoal Peninsula) to maintain the Dutch monopoly, encouraging these localities to develop other trading specialities. But although Banda under the Dutch East India Company represented an entirely unique kind of social and cultural formation, the expansion and concentration of spice production not only connected Moluccan centers more closely with the world system but, paradoxically, made them more dependent on local trading links as well. The growth and specialization of centers of spice production and trade as the result of colonial policy had the effect of producing a more distinct and complex local division of labor and network of exchange relations. As land under spices and population increased, so also did the local trade in sago, root crops, vegetables, and other products necessary to supply deficient spice-producing areas. When centers already important for trade were adopted as convenient administrative centers by the Dutch, bringing an increasing number of retail enterprises to cater to a growing number of wage earners and bureaucrats, trade routes became increasingly centralized, radiating to and from the administrative center.

Let me recapitulate the main points made in elucidating the model of Moluccan interisland trade discussed in this chapter. Moluccan trading patterns may be conveniently represented as a series of nesting (and sometimes overlapping) zones of various degrees of “systemness.” Each local population may participate in up to four levels of trading organization: local, intermediate, regional, and long-distance. Participation is defined minimally in terms of the destination of a population’s exports and the origins of its imports. However, the structural significance of participation at any one level depends also on the types, proportions, range, value, and volume of goods traded. For example, it may be important to know the scale of trade in food products or the local significance of trade in “valuables.” Collectively, such factors determine the degree and kind of reproductive independence a local social formation maintains and that it maintains at different levels of systemic inclusiveness. Depending on the
objective of the analysis and the populations specified, we may decide to emphasize boundaries at the local, intermediate, or regional level; but in all cases we must remember that boundaries are necessarily graded and determined by the structural foci of the systems they encompass (Ellen 1984).

All networks have some systemic properties, but the degree of “systemness” varies. A trading system is composed of one or more zones and is characterized by a network of linkages that theoretically permit its reproduction over time through both a geographical and a social division of economic labor. Each system has a center and a periphery, connected by radial links. A center classically exhibits control over the periphery, although the extent of this control tends to diminish as we move farther from the center. The center connects the system as a whole with the outside world, yet is dependent itself on the resources of the periphery. Settlements on the periphery that are points of production, rather than simply nodes in a trading network, are described here as termini. Nodes that link two or more termini are described as secondary centers, and those that link two or more secondary centers are described as primary centers. In addition to the radial links described, termini and secondary centers may also be connected by lateral linkages that do not pass through primary centers. The extent to which more inclusive systems absorb less inclusive ones depends on the degree and character of external intrusion, and membership of a more inclusive system may in turn redefine the structure and dynamics of local networks. Returning, therefore, to the point at which we began, processes of trade, though they are based on a rationality of individual and group action, can only be understood in the context of interisland organization (cf. Alkire 1965:4), which is simultaneously a context of interacting objective parts that generates its own dynamic and a web of social relationships that, in turn, serve as a conceptual framework for action. This, therefore, in the way it reproduces itself, realizes what we now recognize as Giddens’ (e.g., 1986) framework of structuration.