

## Citizen animals, dodo mayors – the curious account of a visit to Mauritius in 1632

Anthony S. Cheke \*

139 Hurst St., Oxford OX4 1HE, UK

[anthony.cheke@dodobooks.com](mailto:anthony.cheke@dodobooks.com)

\* corresponding author

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Henk Beentje

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, Richmond, Surrey TW9 3AB, UK

[h.beentje@kew.org](mailto:h.beentje@kew.org)

In 1887 a manuscript in the form of a letter to an unknown recipient, without any location given, was published under the headline of ‘famine in Surat in 1631’ (Servaas 1887). While the crisis in the Indian port city of Surat is itself of historical interest, the piece has had some attention in the dodo literature for its curious way of describing animals seen in Mauritius – each is assigned an anthropomorphised identity as if human inhabitants. Published in an obscure Dutch journal, most dodo writers have been unaware of the details. Of the few who noted it, Hachisuka (1953) had clearly only seen a partial second-hand account, whilst Wissen (1996) and Parish (2013), drew attention to the odd attributions and, as did Fuller (2002), bemoaned the lack of information on the source. Only the short passage on dodos themselves has appeared in print and in English translation since the 1887 publication. Pitot (1905), in his classic history of Dutch Mauritius, was unaware of this account and indeed wrote that after January 1629 “for another five years the Dutch did not land on our island, or at least no account mentions any such [landing]” (ASC’s translation).

The published account does not mention the ship the writer travelled on, but the dates match those of the *Ter Veere* given in *Dutch Asiatic shipping* (Bruijn 1979-87, Moree 1998; also <http://resources.huylgens.knaw.nl/das> & [www.vocsite.nl/schepen](http://www.vocsite.nl/schepen)). Colenbrander (1898) confirms the departure of this ship and others from Batavia [now Jakarta] to Surat, as described in the full Servaas text, but not mentioned in Bruijn’s compilation. The *Ter Veere*, a 350 ton East-Indiaman, captain Jan IJsbrandsz. de Jong, left Surat on 2 March 1632, joining the *s’Gravenhage*, which had left on 28 February, on the journey to Mauritius, arriving 29 April. They stayed at Mauritius until 19 May, proceeding to St. Augustine [Madagascar] where they remained from 17 July to 17 September before proceeding to the Cape (November to 2 December) and St. Helena where they waited till the rest of the original fleet joined them before sailing to Zeeland [Netherlands], which they reached on 1 May 1633. The *Ter Veere* had visited Mauritius before, also on a return voyage, 24 December 1628 to 16 January 1629, in company with the *Nassau* and the *Delfshaven*, all with sick crews (Pitot 1905, Moree 1998). They left after having revictualled with “tortoises, ‘perdrix’ [i.e. Red Hens], Dodos, pigs, palm-hearts, coconuts, dried fish and 70-80 goats embarked alive” (Pitot 1905,

ASC's translation).

Oddly to a modern reader, Surat is referred to in the text as being in 'Persia'; Colebrander (1898) likewise referred to 'Suratte en Persia' as the fleet's destination. The Mughal emperor Akbar, whose dynasty was of Persian origin, absorbed Gujarat, where Surat is located, into his empire in 1573 (Davies 1959). Surat was also one of the centres of settlement of the Parsis (= 'Persians'), Zoroastrian refugees who came to India in the eighth-tenth centuries CE (published dates vary) following the Arab, Turk and Mongol conquests of Persia (Boyce 1979).

While the human tragedy of famine is discussed in Surat (not translated), the account of Mauritius is confined to the anthropomorphised description of the animals they found there. Although the text only gives an explanation of these designations, and those given to the foodstuff on board, at the end off the letter, we have given the real name in square brackets at the first usage, to make the account easier to follow.

The principal biological importance of the passage is that it is the only eye-witness account to refer to what the Dodo ate – fruit. It is also one of only two accounts that mention the ability of dodos to use their bills to bite hard in self-defence, the other being the 'Verhuff' account of 1611, actually by Johann Verken (Parish 2013). It is also of some interest that the pigs are reported as thin and scrawny, suggesting they were short of food, and possibly explaining other reports of carnivorous behaviour (attacking and eating young goats and cattle; Cheke & Hume 2008: 81), in addition to the more normal feral pig diet of tortoise and turtle (and, no doubt, Dodo) eggs. The crew of the *Ter Veere* were evidently unaware of, and did not discover, the classic way of attracting Red Hens by waving a red cloth as described by so many other visitors (Cheke & Hume 2008).

The original has enormously long sentences which we have broken up into shorter stretches, but we have not altered the sense or sequence of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Dutch. Words added by us for clarity are in curly brackets {}; animal names are emphasized in bold for ease of reading. The translation is by HB and the commentary by ASC.

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## Hongersnood in Suratta anno 1631 [Famine in Surat, 1631]

[the first section, pp.4-5 in the published version, concerns Surat; the Mauritius account starts on p.5]

So understand, beloved friend, that we left Persia on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March for the island of Mauritius, and have during the voyage been vexed<sup>1</sup> with the low nobility, to wit Sr Speckx [salt pork], miss Claren [fresh water], the Gentleman Ryswyck [boiled rice], Sir Jan Bruyn alias van Souten [salt meat], Sir Piscado Salada [salt fish], but the Gentleman Druyff [Spanish wine] left us, whom we hope to find again in our native country, and then to take up again our friendly conversation with him. But the Mr. Ryswyck, Miss Claren, and Sir Piscado Salada with Sir Speckx have mostly remained on a familiar basis with us, but Sir Jan Bruyn has been little in our company, as he has a horrible stinking breath, for which we cannot stand him, which misfortune will become worse and worse with him; as this is these days incurable, so he will be deserted by all. Passing the time in such a manner we reached the island on the 29<sup>th</sup> April, and came on land, to trade with the inhabitants, which were different in kind, to wit **mayors** [Dodos], **citizens** [pigs], **soldiers** [Red Hens], **tailors** [goats], **farmers** [tortoises] and **unknown inhabitants** [cattle], which we were unable to talk to, as they kept to the mountains.

Upon coming there we first found the **farmers**, which we greeted in their fashion, and they did not acknowledge at all, which we grew angry about, and took them prisoner on board, and tortured till death followed, and then skinned, cooked and then sent to their grave. As the others were surprised about this {they} went into the forest so that from then on we steadily robbed them, bringing aboard **mayors**, **citizens** etc. from which robbery we grew rich, and fattened our waists.

The **mayors** are very superb or well-mannered, they showed themselves to us with a stiff face and open mouth, very self-assured and cocky, hardly wished to move out of our way. Their war weapons were their mouths, with which they knew to bite sharply, their food was raw fruit. {They} were not very well-dressed, but were very rich and fat around the middle, so they were brought aboard in great numbers, to the contentment of us all. The **citizens** were very thin and scrawny of body, very grumpy, pushy and resentful, their gun was two curved long teeth, with which they defended themselves. They were dirty and messy, gave forth a horrible noise when we took them

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1 We have translated ‘gevaccineert’ by vexed as this seems the sense, although *gevaccineert* cannot be identified in Dutch dictionaries old or new.

aboard as prisoners to do them to death like the others.

The **soldiers** were very small in stature and slow of foot, so they could be easily caught by hand, their armour or weapon<sup>2</sup> was their mouth, which was very sharp and pointed, and which they used instead of a dagger. {They} were very cowardly<sup>3</sup> and skittish<sup>4</sup>, not striking like soldiers, {but} running about in great disorder, now here, now there, not being true to each other at all.

The **farmers** are very leaden<sup>5</sup>, plump and stupid, very scared of us and hating. They were very well armed and equipped, they have a hard thick shield on their back and their front, which serves instead of armour, their feet are covered closely with a tough skin, which serves instead of boots, when they go through water, also in the forest, through thistles and thorns, they cannot be damaged. {They} are very fertile and prolific, but lazy and slow, are not active in agriculture, indeed {they} gobble up more crop than they search to plant. As we therefore saw how useless they were for their country, we took many of them for our pleasure.

The **tailors** are their also in great abundance, but recalcitrant and cruel of face, rough of body, hard and thick of hands. {We} could not believe they could ply a needle, but are more inclined to war and robbery, as they are better armed than the soldiers, because they have two circular<sup>6</sup> protuberances on their forehead, like twin horns, and this is their weapon of war, as they defend themselves with these. They produced a hoarse thin noise, when they saw us, with which they could warn each other, they always had a sentry on duty, and when that sentry started calling, young and old would flee into the forest, and they were very true to each other. They were not esteemed by the {other} inhabitants, because all the others from the principles of their birth bring their own clothing so that they have to live from robbery. I do not believe they would be esteemed in Batavia, because of the strange growth on their forehead, which would terrify the citizens of Batavia, as they could hardly believe they had ever seen such before. We took many of them prisoner and aboard.

On the **unknown inhabitants** we have been unable to write with any certainty, as we saw three or four from afar, very large it seemed, like giants compared to the others, and did not show themselves after.

I have set out below the names of the inhabitants, as well as the meaning how to translate, I cannot expand at present as these mentioned above are the principal {ones} of the island of Mauritius.

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2 The original Dutch has 'geweer' (=gun) but 'weapon' seems a more appropriate translation; the same applies later to goats whose horns are said to be their 'oorloochsgeweer' (=oorlogs geweer, war gun).

3 The text has 'bloot' (=naked, bare), but we think the author intended *bloo[d]*, cowardly (see Sewell 1766).

4 'shou' in the original, presumably = *schouw*, of which the most likely meaning, in context, is skittish (Sewell 1766).

5 'lodtlich', presumably = *loden*, leaden, heavy.

6 'ronde' (round), but in reference to goats' horns must mean 'curved round in a circle'.

With this, dear friend, I command you to the protection of the most high who will give you and me what is blessed.

**Explanation of names.**

<i>Sr</i> [Sinjeur] Speckx [‘Sir Bacon’]	salt pork/bacon
( <i>j</i> ) <i>uffrou</i> [miss] Claren [‘Miss Clear’]	fresh water
<i>dHeer</i> [Mr] Ryswyck [‘Mr Rice-refuge’]	boiled rice
<i>Sr</i> Jan Bruyn [‘Sir John Brown’] <i>alias</i> van Souten [or ‘Sir John Knocks-you-down’, alias ?? <sup>7</sup> ]	salted (meat?) [{word} torn off manuscript]}
<i>Sr</i> Piscado Salada [‘Sir Fish Salad’] [or ‘Sir Lettuce Bedwetter’ <sup>8</sup> ]	salted (fish?) [{word} torn off {manuscript}]
<i>dHeer</i> [Mr] Druyf [‘Mr Grape’]	Spanish wine

**Explanation of the inhabitants of the island Mauritius**

<i>Burgemeesters</i> [Mayors]	<i>dottaersen</i> [Dodos <i>Raphus cucullatus</i> ]
<i>borgers</i> [citizens]	[feral] pigs [ <i>Sus scrofa</i> ]
<i>soldaten</i> [soldiers]	<i>velthoenders</i> [literally ‘field hens’, the standard Dutch name used for the flightless rail or Red Hen <i>Aphanapteryx bonasia</i> ]
<i>snijders</i> [tailors]	[feral] goats [ <i>Capra hircus</i> ]
<i>boeren</i> [farmers]	[giant] tortoises [ <i>Cylindraspis</i> spp.]
<i>onbekende inwoonders</i> [unknown inhabitants]	[feral] cattle [ <i>Bos taurus</i> ]

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7 This name and the next appear to be puns – brown (*bruin*) is of course the colour of dried meat, and ‘y’ often substituted for ‘i’ in older Dutch, but also stood in for modern ‘ij’; *bruijen* was (Sewell 1766) to knock down, so, given the ‘bad breath’ (i.e. foul odour), noted for *Sr Bruyn*, it seems quite possible that the author was alluding to both colour and smell with his name – certainly in English a close whiff of really bad halitosis is said to knock the victim back or down. We have been unable to find a meaning for ‘van Souten’.

8 As with *Sr Bruyn*, this name appears to be a pun: *pescado salgada* (with a ‘g’) is ‘salt fish’ in Portuguese, but *pisgat* is (or was) a piss-a-bed [bed-wetter] in Dutch (Sewell 1766), though not in modern dictionaries; was the fish diuretic ?