

Coins of the realm: Some coins of the Dutch colonial period

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ABSTRACT

Beginning with the Spanish dollar (the 'pieces of eight' of Pirate lore fame), this paper takes the reader on a brief journey through history, touching on various coins used in the Dutch East Indies during the colonial period.

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VERSION HISTORY

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*One Dutchman and forty Kaili men fought
together, and they were equally matched.*

*A religious scholar's son comes to Medina
from Mecca but isn't allowed in the mosque.*

(two Sulawesi riddles circa 1925, both having to do with coins; answers below)

Did you know that in the 1800s a coin with Bugis inscription used to be minted in Manchester, England? Numismatics isn't even a hobby of mine, but some Sulawesi terms for coins of a bygone era led me to follow some interesting threads through history...

The Spanish dollar and other dollar coins

It began with Cortez, really. With his conquest of the Aztecs, the richest silver mines in the world came under Spanish control. Soon, with so much silver, the standard, 3.43 gram real (rē-al, a shortening from Latin *numus regalis* 'royal coin') was no longer sufficient, and so 2-, 4- and 8-real pieces were struck. This last denomination became the most popular and, because of its high quality silver, for nearly three centuries served the world as the first real 'international' coin of commerce. It flowed through Spain into the rest of Europe, through the Spanish colony of the Philippines into South East Asia, and from Mexico directly into other parts of North and South America. In China and other places, the government or great trading houses counter-stamped 8-real coins with their own insignias, for use as tender in their own realms. While never counter-stamped, nonetheless 8-real silver coins were official legal tender in the U.S. until 1858, and were the model for the American silver dollar.

In Spanish this coin was known officially as the 'Ocho Real' or 'Real de la Ocho,' and unofficially as the peso.¹ In English it was known as the Spanish dollar or 'piece of eight' (of pirate lore fame). In Asia it sometimes garnered the name 'Mexican dollar' or 'Mex-dollar.' In the Malay world, it became known simply as the *rial* (even though it was worth, of course, eight Spanish reales).²

¹ The term 'peso' came from the point in the manufacturing process where each coin was weighed to see if it was overweight, underweight, or exactly one weight ('un peso'). Nevertheless, all coins of this denomination bore the marking '8 R.' never the word 'Peso.' The 2-real coin was unofficially known as a 'peseta' ('small peso').

² Compare also riyal, the basic monetary unit of Saudi Arabia, which has the same etymology.

In 1732, Spanish dollars (pieces of eight) began to be milled with screw presses, replacing hand-stamped ‘cob’ coins. The milled coin, which had serrated edges to guarantee the integrity of the coin, became known in Malay as the *rial beringgit* (*beringgit* = jagged, toothed), a term which soon became shortened to *ringgit*.

The Dutch equivalent (one could perhaps even say imitation) of the Spanish dollar was the *rijksdaalder* (*rijk* = realm, kingdom, empire, *daalder* = dollar) or in English rix-dollar, which had a value of 2½ Dutch guilders. Both Spanish dollars and rix-dollars (not to mention other kinds of dollar coins) were known in the Dutch East Indies as *ringgit*. Several varieties of ‘ringgit’ were thus in circulation, albeit not necessarily at the same time. According to Wilkinson (1959:s.v.), at least the following could be distinguished:

ringgit pansĕmat, *ringgit pasmat* = the Spanish dollar in general (*pansĕmat* is from *Spaansche mat*, the Dutch term for the Spanish 8-real coin).³

ringgit meriam, *ringgit patong* = the Spanish pillar dollar, the earliest variety of milled Spanish dollar (minted 1732-1771), so named because of the pillars of Hercules (rather than a dignitary’s bust) which were depicted on the reverse.

ringgit bare = the Dutch rix-dollar in general.

ringgit nona = Dutch rix-dollar with the queen’s head.

ringgit kĕpala, *ringgit tĕngkorak* = Dutch rix-dollar with the king’s head.

ringgit tongkat = the British or Hong Kong dollar.

Dutch East Indies coins of other demoninations

Against that background, here then are various denominations of coins which circulated in the Dutch East Indies, from greatest to least value. Values given below (in terms of sen/rupiah) follow *Kamus Besar* 3rd edition, but actual equivalences may have varied according to the region or time period. For abbreviations, I have used: ML. = Malay, Du. = Dutch, Eng. = English; Wilk. = Wilkinson (1959); Mhd. = personal communication from Waruno Mahdi (1999); Jones = Jones (2007). If this information proves insufficient, see further Scholten’s 1953 book, *The Coins of the Dutch Overseas Territories, 1601-1948* (a resource to which, unfortunately, I didn’t have access when preparing this article).

250 sen = 2.50 rupiah

1 *ringgit* (ML.) = 1 *rijksdaalder* (Du.), etc. See above.

100 sen = 1.00 rupiah

1 *pĕrak*, 1 *rupiah* (ML.) = 1 *gulden*, 1 *florijn* (Du.) = 1 guilder, 1 florin (Eng.).

An etymological curiosity is that *pĕrak* also means ‘silver,’ while *gulden* originally

³ The origin of *mat* in this expression is obscure, perhaps via French *matte* ‘impure metal.’

meant ‘golden’ (viz. referring to a kind of gold coin). Indonesians abroad also use *péрак* to refer colloquially to the local currency of their host country (Mhd.). In Dutch writings, the usual abbreviation for rupiah/gulden/florijn is ‘*f.*’

50 sen = 0.50 rupiah

1 *suku* (Ml.) = 1 *halve gulden* (Du.) = 1 half-guilder (Eng.). Etymologically, *suku* means ‘limb,’ thus also ‘section,’ ‘quarter,’ ‘division,’ ‘tribe,’ etc. However, while Wilkinson notes the expression *rial dan suku* ‘dollars and quarter dollars,’ *suku* clearly referred to a coin with the value of one-half of a guilder, or one-fifth of a rix-dollar.

25 sen = 0.25 rupiah

1 *talén*, 1 *tali*, 3 *uang* (Ml.) = 1 quarter-guilder (Eng.). The term *tali* is more widespread in Sumatra, the term *talén* (< *tali+an*) in Java. In both cases, the name derives from the practice of stringing three *uang* coins together (*uang* coins having a hole in the middle) (Mhd.) (cf. Malay *tali* ‘string’). The *uang* itself was an old coin which came to have the meaning of ‘money’ in general. “As a measure of value, the *wang* [*uang*] was a third of a *tali*; the *tali* was an eighth of a Spanish dollar. But the introduction of new basic coins like the rupee and the rix-dollar caused local differences in the value of the *tali*; in places it was a quarter of a rupee or guilder while in other places it was more. The *wang* at first was eight Dutch doits, afterwards (as *wang baharu*) it became ten. But whatever its value, the *wang* was always a third of the corresponding *tali*” (Wilk.).

10 sen = 0.10 rupiah

1 *picis*, 1 *pitis*, 1 *kétip*, 1 *kupang* (Ml.) = a 10-cent piece, 1 guilder-dime (Eng.) A *picis* or *pitis* was a tin coin with a hole in the middle in imitation of Chinese cash (Wilk.), where *picis* is from Mandarin *pei*⁴ *tzü*³ ‘cowries, anciently used as currency’ (Jones). The term *picis* is also used by Indonesians abroad to mean ‘dime’ (Mhd.). A *kétip* on the other hand was a silver coin, the smallest silver coin in circulation (Wilk.). A *kupang* (also *kupa*, *kobang*, *koban*) was probably a third kind of coin, all three having somewhat near the same value. Originally, however, a *kupang* was a kind of gold coin, also called *mas kupang* ‘gold dinar’—cf. Jones who relates Malay *kupang* to Japanese *koban* ‘a kind of oval gold coin of standardized weight’—and even today the term *kupang* can also refer to a goldsmith’s weight.

2.5 sen = 0.025 rupiah

1 *bénggol*, 1 *gobang*, 1 *sen ringgit* (Ml.) = 2½-cent piece, 1 rix-dollar cent (Eng.) Both *bénggol* and *gobang* remain in the active Indonesian vocabulary, but a coin of this denomination has not been in circulation for several decades; apparently not used for local coinage abroad, perhaps because coins in this fraction are rare (Mhd.). Wilkinson deviates somewhat, writing that a *bénggol* was a “coin representing a guilder-cent,” while a *gobang* (variants *gubang*, *kobang*) was “a coin worth about 5 cents.” Jones indicates that *gobang* is from Hokchiu (Foochow) *ngu*² *pwang*^{3,4}.

⁴ Or, as Wilkinson suggests, could *gobang* simply be a variant of *kupang*, *kobang*?

1 sen = 0.01 rupiah

1 *sen* (Ml.) = 1 cent (Eng.)

0.5 sen = 0.005 rupiah

1 *pésér*, 1 *rimis* (Ml.) = half-cent, half-penny (Eng.) Whilst the coins are no longer used, the terms *pésér* and *rimis*, along with *bénggol* and *gobang*, still occur figuratively in expressions equivalent to English ‘not worth a cent’ (the term *sén* itself, however, is not used this way) (Mhd.).

Doits and rooster doits

Finally, mention must be made of the copper coin called *duit* in Dutch and Malay,⁵ and transliterated into English as ‘doit.’ A doit was at one time one-eighth of a stiver (Du. *stuiver*), a stiver being one-twentieth of a guilder (a stiver can thus be thought of as a ‘Dutch nickel’). This suggests then that a doit must have had a value of 1/160th of a guilder, but its value, at least in Indonesia, seems to have been somewhat higher. *Kamus Besar* gives 1/120th of a rupiah, and Wilkinson likewise notes that “in the early 19th century 120 duits went to the guilder, or about 300 to the [rix-]dollar”. Doits were minted in the Netherlands (where each province had its own mint), and imported to the Dutch East Indies (Moquette 1908). Just as with *uang*, the word *duit* or some variation thereof has entered the word stock of several languages of Indonesia as the general word for ‘money.’

In the early 1800s, imitation Dutch doits were also being minted in Manchester (a loophole in English law allowed private mints to manufacture copper coins). By 1844, the manufacture of imitation Dutch doits was nixed by the English authorities under pressure from the Dutch government. However, the private mints continued as before to produce similar-sized copper coins which were decidedly *not* Dutch coins, bearing the emblem of a cock on one side and jawi (Arabic) or lontara (Bugis) script on the other. These so-called *duit ayam* (Du. *haantjesduiten*, Eng. rooster doits, cock farthings, or ‘chicken coins’) weren’t the official coinage of any country. Instead they were commissioned and imported by the large trading companies in Singapore, whence they wended their way into commerce in Malaysia and the Dutch East Indies (Reid 1990). Rooster doits had a trading value less than a true Dutch doit. According to de Clercq (1890:134), speaking of the interior of Sulawesi, 360 rooster doits went to the guilder. This same value can also be deduced from equivalences given in Adriani’s 1928 dictionary of Bare’e (Pamona)—see Appendix 1.

⁵ Some sources suggest that doits were also called *képéng* in Malay, but this was (at least originally) a different kind of small-valued tin or copper coin; see Wilkinson (1959:s.v.). In origin, doits were actually wooden tokens. The Dutch word *duit* comes from the Germanic root *thwit*, from which we also get the English word *whittle*.

Appendix 1: Pamona money terms

The following are some old money terms in Pamona, Central Sulawesi, taken along with their definitions from Adriani (1928:s.v.).

doi : money; *doi buya* : silver money, coinage; *doi manu* : rooster doit, in circulation in Central Sulawesi until 1922; *doi ngiro* : a clipped coin (from improper minting); *doi karatasa* : paper money
oa (from Buginese *oang*), also *ua* (from Malay *uang*) : a value of ten rooster doits, around 2½ guilder cents
pisi : a Balinese doit with a hole in it, sometimes used as decoration on a fine hat
ringgi : 1 rix-dollar; *ringgi goli ngkaii* : rix-dollar with the image of Willem II (facing left); *ringgi goli ngkana* : rix-dollar with the image of Willem III (facing right)
rupia : 1 guilder
suku (from Buginese) : a value of sixty rooster doits = two *tali* = 6 *ua*, roughly 16½ cents; *suku-suku* : a half-guilder; *suku-suku wuyawa* : a gold ten-guilder
tali (from Buginese): an amount of 30 rooster doits, roughly 8½ cents; *tali-tali* : a quarter = 90 rooster doits

Based on these definitions, we can prepare the following currency table for Pamona.

1 oa		=	10 rooster doits	=	2 ⁷ / ₉ cents	
3 oa	=	1 tali	=	30 rooster doits	=	8 ¹ / ₃ cents
2 tali	=	1 suku	=	60 rooster doits	=	16 ² / ₃ cents
3 tali	=	1 tali-tali	=	90 rooster doits	=	25 cents
2 tali-tali = 3 suku	=	1 suku-suku	=	180 rooster doits	=	50 cents
2 suku-suku	=	1 guilder	=	360 rooster doits	=	100 cents

Appendix 2: Swettenham currency tables

The following currency tables are taken from Swettenham's Malay-English dictionary (1887:129). Although these are Malaysian rather than Indonesian terms, they illustrate how coinage could vary even within a small geographic area.

Singapore and Malacca

4 duit (¹ / ₄ -cent)	=	1 sen (1 cent)
2 ¹ / ₂ sen	=	1 wang (2 ¹ / ₂ cents)
10 wang	=	1 suku (25 cents)
4 suku	=	1 ringgit (1 dollar)

Penang and Province Wellesley

10 duit (cent)*	=	1 kûpang (10 cents)
12 ¹ / ₂ duit	=	1 tâli (12 ¹ / ₂ cents)
2 tâli	=	1 suku (25 cents)
4 suku	=	1 ringgit (1 dollar)

* The duit (1 cent) is divided into halves and quarters—“stengah duit” and “suku duit.”

Păhang

1 itam tengko	=	4 cents of dollar
2 itam tengko	=	1 kënëri (gold) (8 cents)
2 kënëri = 2 saga	=	1 buso (16 cents)
2 buso = 1 suku	=	1 kûpang (33 ¹ / ₃ cents)
3 kûpang	=	1 ringgit (1 dollar)
4 kûpang	=	1 mas (\$1.33 ¹ / ₃ dollar)
16 mas	=	1 bungkal Pahang

Answers to riddles

The Dutchman was a tin *picis*, and the forty Kaili men were forty copper *duit ayam*. The religious scholar’s son was a Spanish dollar, which was valid currency in Mecca but not accepted in Dutch government offices. Both riddles are courtesy of Kruyt (1929).

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