

Colonial governance in transition: political and practical aspects of Dutch and British rule in Sri Lanka, 1780- 1815.

Introduction

For almost 150 years, from 1658 to 1796, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) ruled over coastal Ceylon. Cinnamon was the principal product that attracted the Dutch to the island, because only on Ceylon¹ the finest quality was found. To secure a monopoly of this product they occupied the entire coast of the island. In the mountainous interior, the Buddhist kingdom of Kandy maintained its power despite various attempts of the Dutch to annex the kingdom. In 1796, during the Napoleonic wars, the British East India Company (EIC) took over the government of the Dutch in Ceylon. It was not the cinnamon that allured the British to the island in the first place, but its strategic position near to the Indian subcontinent.

What did this transition from Dutch to British government entail for the inhabitants of Ceylon? This is the basic question of my research project. In 1809 Jacob Burnand, a former civil servant of the VOC who continued to live on the island after the take-over, already knew the answer:

‘Ceylon, having changed its masters in the years 1795 and 1796, a total subversion in the system of its government took place, and this subversion, in spite of the many advantages possessed by the English Company of introducing improvements, has had a deplorable effect on the agriculture, and consequently on the bulk of the people.

[...]

In a word, the inhabitants of the country have retrograded from the civilization and dependence in which they formerly lived, into a degeneracy that may be attended with the most deplorable consequences’²

Fifty years later, Sir James Tennent argued exactly the opposite in his two-volume masterpiece *Ceylon. An account of the island. Physical, historical and topographical*. In the historical section of volume two, he describes the hundred and fifty years of Dutch presence on the island that preceded the British occupation. In the last paragraph he concludes:

‘The story of the dominion of Holland in Ceylon is not altogether unrelieved by passages indicative of more generous impulses, but these were so transient and so uniformly succeeded by reversions to the former pusillanimous system, that the general character of their administration is unredeemed from the charge of meanness and tyranny.’³

Subsequently, he finishes the chapter by stating that the relatively easy take-over of the Dutch possessions by the British in 1796 ‘may be regarded as an evidence that the Dutch had become as indifferent to its retention as the Singalese were rejoiced at its capture.’⁴ After these remarks, the author recounts the history of British occupation of the island. Not surprisingly, he is of the opinion that British rule was the best that could have

¹ Sri Lanka used to be named Ceylon by the Europeans. Only in the 1970s did the government rename the island Sri Lanka.

² Jacob Burnand ‘Fragments on Ceylon’ *Asiatic journal May-August* 1821

³ James Tennent, *Ceylon. An account of the island; physical, historical and topographical. volume II* (New Delhi 1999, 1st print 1859). 61-62.

⁴ James Tennent, *Ceylon, volume II*. 62.

happened to the inhabitants of the island, because in the end it brought them prosperity and just rule. This contrast between Dutch and British rule, of stagnation and progress respectively, is still strongly represented in Sri Lankan historiography, despite the severe remarks of Burnand.

The aim of my Ph.D. project is an analysis of colonial rule on Ceylon between ca. 1780 and ca. 1815. The question of continuity and discontinuity in the administration of these regions stands central in the project and is examined on the basis of the following three subjects. First, I investigate the administration and the relationship of both European powers with the local elite and the Eurasian communities in the coastal areas of Ceylon. Second, I analyse the views the Dutch and the British held on their own presence and territorial power on the island. Finally, I study the relationship between the King of Kandy and the Dutch and the British respectively. In this way I intend to surpass the traditional periodization of Sri Lankan history.

The departure point of this study is the primary source material, official and private, created by the servants of both colonial governments. The Dutch sources relating to the period have by-and-large remained untouched by historians. So far, historians who studied the Dutch period of Sri Lankan history, like Arasaratnam, Goonawardena and Kotelawele have focussed on the seventeenth and early eighteenth century.⁵ Others mostly relied on published and translated sources like the *memories van overgave*, manuals on the government of the island written by the various governors for their successors. However these do not cover the last decades of Dutch rule. The British sources, government papers, private correspondences and contemporary publications like the one of Burnand quoted above, sometimes provide an extra perspective on the Dutch period. But of course I will use them primarily to examine the various aspects of British governance in the period itself. Although in comparison with the Dutch period, much more has been published on those early years of British rule, it still remains a incoherent period because of the various shifts in policy and changes of institutions. These have been described, but not really interpreted or placed in the context either of Dutch antecedents or contemporary developments elsewhere in the British and other emerging empires.⁶

It is my explicit intention to connect my findings from the archives to three major existing historiographic traditions that have so far hardly been connected to each other. In the first place a connection is made with the rather fragmented and topical historiography on Sri Lankan history. Secondly, I place the research in the context of the literature on the colonial transition in South Asia at large that is assigned to the period ca. 1780-1830. The third historiographic question to which I link my results is the comparison, on a more general level, of the colonial systems of the Dutch and the British in Asia. In the end, I hope to create a new, much more integrated and dynamic perspective of this period in Sri Lankan history.

In the next pages, I will first give a brief characterisation of the period based on the results of my archival research. Next, I will relate this to the three historiographic perspectives respectively and give examples as to how my study fits in and offers new insights. In my presentation on Wednesday the 17th of May I will further elaborate on one issue, namely the Dutch and British views on their own presence and territorial power on the island.

⁵ S. Arasaratnam, *Dutch power in Ceylon 1658-1687* (Amsterdam 1958); K. Goonawardena, *The foundation of Dutch power in Ceylon, 1638-1658* (Amsterdam 1958); D.A. Kotelawele . 'Agrarian policies of the Adutch in South-West Ceylon, 1743-1767.' In: *AAG bijdragen*, 14, 1967.

⁶ In particular: C.R. de Silva, *Ceylon under the British administration, 1796-1833. Vol 1 & 2* praiseworthy because of its detailed descriptions.

The emergence of the colonial state on Ceylon

In the years 1780-1830 a definite transition to colonial rule took place in most of the regions in Asia where European traders had settled in the preceding centuries. It is a development that is recognised in particular for Java and India. The period is distinguished as one of consolidation of military and political power of the European companies (and states⁷) over the native societies. In most cases, it involved a shift from merely trading settlements to colonies of exploitation in which the land-revenues yielded most profits. In India, but also in Java, it was a period in which the colonial state took shape, and the legal and fiscal institutions emerged as the backbones of the respective governments. Traditionally, in Sri Lanka this transition was considered to have occurred only after the transition of power from Dutch to British hands.

I, however, argue that the colonial transition on Ceylon passed more gradually and found its origin in the first half of the eighteenth century.⁸ Moreover, I found that from the 1780s onwards, this development was accelerated by two factors. First was the cultivation of cinnamon in the plantations of the Company and private gardens. This was a novelty, for cinnamon had always been collected in the wild and its production was now, after a period of experimenting with cinnamon cultivation from about 1767, brought under the Company's control. Second were the increased government expenses for rice. At the time, the VOC was in decay and supplies of basic foodstuffs like rice for its garrisons arrived less regularly on the island than before. Above this, the labour force that was deployed on the new cinnamon plantations required additional supplies of rice.

Consequently, Governor Willem Jacob Van de Graaff (1785-1794) decided that Ceylon had to yield sufficient rice from the island itself. To meet this end, Van de Graaff shifted his attention to the peripheral regions on the island, like the east coast, the Vanni and Manaar regions, brought them under tight control and invested in the irrigation and the clearance of new grounds.⁹ It was his plan to turn these regions into a *broodkamer* or storage room for the rest of the island. In the traditional centre of Dutch power, the South West, waste land was given out on contracts forcing the tenants to cultivate part of their lands for the Company with cinnamon or other commercial crops. Van de Graaff's hunger for land even led him to intrigue with the nobles of the court of Kandy and to exploit the rivalries that existed between the various factions at the court. However, his attempt to take over those areas, in collusion with one of the most powerful nobles, failed.

In this period, the government of the island became more centralised and the relationship of the VOC with the native headmen who had played the role of middlemen between colonial government and native society, became tighter and better defined. The original systems of indirect rule was transformed into a more direct type of government, in which the native headmen had well defined task descriptions and were held

⁷ To make things more complex: Java was ruled by the VOC until it went bankrupt and all properties fell into the hands of the state. India was ruled by the East India Company (EIC), but in this period it came under a tighter control of parliament. Ceylon was ruled by the VOC until 1796, then taken over by the EIC who ruled it from Madras until 1798, when the EIC shared power over Ceylon with the British crown. In 1802 the British colony on Ceylon fell entirely under the crown's authority.

⁸ D.A. Kotelawele. 'Agrarian policies of the Dutch in South-West Ceylon, 1743-1767.' In: *AAG bijdragen*, 14, 1967. Governor Van Imhoff installed landraads (landcourts) and started with a large land and people registration campaign in the South West and in Jaffna.

⁹ The ruins of ancient water tanks and irrigation systems were spread around these peripheral regions. For the Dutch and later the British this proved that these regions could successfully be brought into cultivation.

accountable for their performance. The efficiency of the revenue departments increased and Van de Graaff managed to improve the revenue of the colony with fifty percent. In the South West the traditional centre of Dutch power, the private interest of Dutch officials and native headmen converged in the setting up of cinnamon plantations and the growth of other commercial crops. Finally, the period witnessed an increase of Dutch private capital investment in local agricultural projects.

After the British had taken over Dutch possessions on the island, the strategic importance of the island soon faded and already in 1800 the policymakers in London realised that the island needed to yield more profit and could not afford to rely on their East India Company for the supply of rice. In the first years of British rule the agriculture in the periphery had declined once more, due to the military operations at first and the lack of colonial supervision later on. Once again the colonial policy-makers came to the conclusion that part of the island should be turned into a granary, in order to make it self-sufficient. The colonial intrusion that had commenced in the 1780s was now continued. Again the attention of the colonial policy-makers was drawn inland and to the periphery and the British officials tried to stimulate the paddy cultivation and to increase the inland revenue through efficient administration. Centralisation of power in the hands of the colonial government continued and with the subjection of the Kandyan territories in 1815, the colonial transition had become a fact. The first fifteen years of British rule are characterised by a search for effective governance and the final shape of government and direction of inland policy came about in the course of the 1810s.

It had much in common with the Dutch policies, but it also distinguished itself in certain matters. For example, the legal institutions were transformed and most legal power was taken away from the native headmen. In general, the nature of the relationship between government and the native headmen changed. The mixture of official and private relationships between government officials and native headmen that had characterised the Dutch period, disappeared. Also, in some cases, the British government reverted to policies that were custom in the days prior to the reforms of Van de Graaff, like in the organisation of the cinnamon department.

1: Sri Lankan historiography

In general in the historiography of Sri Lanka the colonial transition has not been a specific subject of study. Most emphasis in historical studies is on the late nineteenth century or the pre-colonial era. Since the 1970s, the study of the long-term development of particular social groups or castes in Sri Lankan society has been a popular subject. Another important issue is the emergence of ethnic consciousness on the island, which led to the violent divide between the Tamil and Singalese communities in post-colonial times. Such histories often cover a long time-span, from the fifteenth till the twentieth century, in other cases it commences with the British period and continues well into the twentieth century.¹⁰ However, in both fields of research the period around 1800 is often regarded as a crucial period in the development for the respective objects of research. Therefore, my research helps to place such developments in new perspectives and sometimes provides the missing link.

An example of the latter was the case in the rise of the Karava (fishermen) caste to a socio-economic elite who came to possess political power in the late nineteenth century, next to the traditional elites. The historian Michael Roberts connects the rise

¹⁰ For example: Michael Roberts, *Caste conflict and elite formation. The rise of the Karava elite in Sri Lanka, 1500-1931* (New Delhi 1995; 1982); Michael Roberts, *Sinhala consciousness in the Kandyan period 1590s to 1815* (Colombo 2003) Patrick Peebles, *Social change in nineteenth century Ceylon* (New Delhi, 1995).

with the late Dutch period and the arrival of the British, but fails to explain it.¹¹ I found that the Karavas had already cooperated with the Dutch in their private enterprises, and took over part of their economic position after the change of regime. Thus, on the one hand the increased private activities of the Dutch gave the Karavas the opportunities to join in with their activities, and the change of regime and the economic decline of the Dutch inhabitants, opened up new openings for them. It shows how developments that may seem to have occurred autonomously, were actually related to the European presence on the island.

Another point in case is my study of the relationship between the colonial powers and the Kingdom of Kandy. I placed the final collaboration of the Singalese nobles with the British and the deposition of their South Indian king in 1815 in a new perspective, by showing how from the 1780s onwards the kingdom had been unstable due to Dutch intrigues. Some historians have attributed the fall of the kingdom to the emergence of ethnic consciousness in Singalese society, while I would argue that it was brought about mainly by economic factors. Since the 1760s the kingdom had been economically isolated by the Dutch, which caused a weakening of the position of the Singalese nobles and strengthened that of the South Indian retinue of the king, who still had access to South Indian resources through their family ties. Ethnic consciousness seems not to have been a decisive factor in this particular case.

2: The Colonial transition in South Asia

In the second half of the twentieth century, the historiography of the colonial transition in South Asia developed first from a colonialist outlook, stressing the progressive impact of the emergence of colonial rule in the Asian regions, to a nationalist vision that again emphasised the power of the colonial regimes to transform native society but now characterised it in terms of retardation, subjection and suppression. Later, historians started to recognise the role of native brokers and powerholders in the construction of the colonial states, and emphasised the continuity of elements of native society in the new colonial context. As a consequence, they stressed that the impact of colonial design was limited and focussed on autonomous, pre-colonial developments.¹² In a way, the Sri Lankan historiography discussed above fits in with this school.

At the same time a new school of historians of India emerged, who accepted that well-informed service elites collaborated with the new regimes, but pointed again at a break with the past. They argued that the information with which these native power holders provided the government officials, and on which government based its policies, were naturally biased towards their own interest and led to an unbalanced growth of their power over other groups. In India this would have altered social relations: in their view the caste system in particular became fixed in a manner unknown in the past.¹³

In this context, it is interesting that the Dutch and British systems of government developed on Ceylon during this period of transition were not entirely similar, even though they were aiming at the same goals. Therefore the Sri Lankan case may shed new light on this discussion. By analysing the differences and similarities, a picture arises of continuing local pressures, the influence of particular power groups on the construction of the colonial state and specific Dutch, British or even personal colonial input.

¹¹ Michael Roberts, *Caste conflict and elite formation. The rise of the Karava elite in Sri Lanka, 1500-1931* (New Delhi 1995; 1982)

¹² Chris Bayly is one of the leading scholars of this school and has explored the topic in various publications. See for example: *Indian society and the making of the British empire* (Cambridge, 1988) and *Rulers, townsmen and bazaars: North Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770-1870* (Cambridge 1983)

¹³ Nicolas Dirks in one of the leading scholars in this respect see for example his *Casts of the mind. Colonialism and the making of modern India* (Princeton 2001)

For example, despite their explicit attempts, the British did not succeed in finding other powerful native collaborators in the South West, other than the group of headmen, mudaliyars, that had held that position in the Dutch days. However, the relationship they build up with this group differed from that of the Dutch. Instead of a convergence of interest as occurred in the Dutch times, the interest of the British colonial government and the headmen initially diverged. This was a consequence of the British mistrust and attempts to diminish the power of this group by giving them less privileges and authority. Only later, in the 1810s they realised, to their own surprise, that this had led to a decline rather than growth in agriculture. A lack of insight in the functioning of local society and an overestimate of their own power above that of the native headmen, were to blame for it. Paradoxically, the result was that the British came to rely much more on the mudaliyars than they had wished for.

The continuance of the mudaliyars in the position of headmen against the will of the colonial ruler reveals the limits of colonial power in this period of transition. However the character of their relationship with the colonial government differed from the way it had developed in Dutch times. It shows that we cannot speak of either a break or continuity with the past and it asks for a more balanced approach. The colonial state was the outcome of a confrontation between the capacities of native society and the demands of the colonial rulers. This outcome was not pre-defined either by the social structures of native society, or by the particular policies of the colonial ruler, but the results of clashes and accommodations between the two.

In 2004, *Modern Asian Studies* devoted an issue to the colonial transition in South Asia. The contributions are difficult to characterise because of their great topical variety. However, the editors explain in the introduction that through micro-studies these historians attempt to achieve a more balanced view of the colonial transition in which both continuity and change is acknowledged. This will eventually lead to an overall characterisation of the functioning of the colonial state in this emergent stage, in which intentions of policy making are related to the decision making processes and practices on the spot. To give some examples, it leaves space for the study of the personal influence of government officials and their background experience on policy making and also for a detailed study of court sentences to examine the role of local power and colonial prejudices in the functioning of the colonial courts. It is not entirely clear in which direction this trend is moving, but my research on Sri Lanka in this transitional period encourages such a balanced approach.

3: Dutch and British particularities

Even though the emphasis in the study is on the interaction between native society and colonial rulers, it does also connect to the debates relating to the character of Dutch and British colonial systems. In all, it was a period in which the colonial administrations took new directions and the limited possibilities for experiments fully exploited. Without overstressing the power of colonial rulers in the creation of the colonial state, it is possible to illuminate particular characteristics of Dutch and British rule. Traditionally, Dutch colonial rule in this period is seen as part of the *ancien régime*, while British rule is characterised by enlightened liberalism. This is reinforced by the expressions of the British after the take-over that stressed their moral superiority.

In this context, Peter Marshall has argued that the British expressions of morality were not entirely unsubstantiated. In line with his broader research on the period, he shows that from the 1770s onwards, the Enlightenment ideals of free trade, personal liberty and equality asked for a justification of colonial policies, which led to a liberal or

humanitarian attitude among the British.¹⁴ It remained to be studied what shape British humanitarianism took on Ceylon. As for the Dutch rulers, the question lingered on whether or not they were touched by the idea of humanitarianism in their policy making, prior to the British take-over. Jurrien van Goor, who recently compared Dutch and British colonial rule does not provide us with a definite answer to this question.¹⁵

In addition to my study of colonial policy and practices on Ceylon in the period 1780-1815, I have also tried to get an impression of the Dutch and British spirit of the time in relation to colonial affairs. How did the colonial officials view local society and how did they see themselves as actors in it? This will be discussed on May the 17th.

¹⁴ P.J. Marshall, 'A free though conquering people' *eighteenth century Britain and its empire.* (Ashgate, 2003); 'British assessments of the Dutch in Asia in the Age of Raffles' in: Marshall, Van Niel et al. *India and Indonesia during the ancient regime* (Leiden 1989); P.J. Marshall and Glyndwr Williams, *The great map of mankind. Perceptions of the new worlds in the age of Enlightenment.* (Cambridge Mass. 1982)

¹⁵ J. van Goor, 'Continuity and change in the Dutch position in Asia between 1750 and 1850' in: B. Moore and H. van Nierop, *Colonial empires compared. Britain and the Netherlands, 1750-1850* (Ashgate, 2003).