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'Toddlers, widows, and bastards enthroned. Dynastic successions in early-modern south India as observed by the Dutch'

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Toddlers, Widows, and Bastards Enthroned. Dynastic Successions in Early-Modern South India as Observed by the Dutch*

Lennart Bes

In 1689 the Dutch East India Company received a remarkable letter from a certain Sadashiva Nayaka, who introduced himself as the king of the south Indian kingdom of Ikkeri. Beginning his letter with a list of his royal ancestors leading up to himself, Sadashiva went on to say how beloved he was by all local chiefs in Ikkeri. Furthermore, he emphasised his manliness, claiming that even the bravest warriors feared him and mentioning the inappropriateness of women ruling over men. In short, he was to be considered the ideal king: a real man, held in high esteem, commanding kingdom-wide support, and of pure royal descent – and therefore fully entitled to sit on the Ikkeri throne.¹

Sadly for Sadashiva, in the same letter he had to admit that the throne was occupied by someone else. In fact, for nearly two decades already, Ikkeri had been reigned by Chennammaji. Surprisingly, this ruler seems to have had hardly any credentials to qualify as a monarch. To start with – and to Sadashiva's horror – Chennammaji was a woman. Besides, she was the widow of a king who had been installed as a child, later went mad, and finally was murdered. Moreover, both Chennammaji and her former husband were said not to be of pure royal blood but born by a slave-girl and another non-regal woman. Yet, Chennammaji ruled as queen over Ikkeri, whereas Sadashiva was a powerless pretender on the run. For years, he had been wandering around south India with a few followers and his letter to the Dutch was actually a request for military assistance to expel

* A first version of this paper was presented at the third Encompass Conference at the University of Colombo in August 2011, and I am grateful to the organisers for inviting me to partake in it. I also would like to thank Peter Rietbergen, Jos Gommans, Maaïke van Berkel, Jinna Smit, and my fellow imperial explorers in the Eurasian Empires programme, Marie Favereau-Doumenjou, Liesbeth Geevers, and Willem Flinterman, for their comments on various drafts. Naturally, the views expressed here are entirely my own.

¹ Nationaal Archief, The Hague (hereafter referred to as: NA), Archives of the *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (Dutch East India Company, hereafter referred to as: VOC) (access no. 1.04.02), inv. no. 1463, fol. 437v-441v.

Chennammaji and become king himself.² His boasting about all his regal qualities was meant to convince the Dutch of his rights. But apparently, the men who should be king were not always the men – or women – who would be king.

This discrepancy between concepts of legitimate succession on the one hand, and the reality of succession struggles between rivals and the enthronement of illegitimate or puppet rulers on the other, is the subject of this essay. I will discuss successions in three early-modern south Indian kingdoms, one of which is the aforementioned Ikkeri, situated on India's south-west coast. The other two are Tanjavur and Ramnad, both located at the south-eastern end of the Indian subcontinent. In all these kingdoms, there was a preference for primogeniture and legitimacy when a new ruler ascended the throne. Although traditions were slightly different for each kingdom, in principle a king was to be succeeded by the eldest son of his (chief) queen, and rulers often installed their son as heir-apparent during their lifetime. If such a son did not exist or was too young, the general tendency seems to have been that the throne went to a brother of the previous king, again with the eldest one having priority, except in Ramnad where daughters are said to have had preference over brothers. If such direct heirs were not available, cousins, uncles, or others belonging to collateral branches of the family generally would be next in line. Finally, adoption of a successor was also an option. In sum, it appears that sons had preference over brothers, elder relatives over younger relatives, men over women, and biological relatives over adopted relatives.³

But despite these preferences, more often than not it were toddlers, widows, or bastards who ended up on the south Indian thrones considered here, rather than the oldest mature son or brother of the previous ruler. Therefore, my questions are, first, how did dynastic successions proceed, and second, how did the kingdoms differ from each other in this respect? Below, I will first briefly introduce the three kingdoms and discuss the sources this paper is based on. Next, I will specifically look at successions in each kingdom, describing some of them in detail and considering general

² NA, VOC, inv. no. 1463, fol. 438, 441.

³ See K. N. Chitnis, *Keladi Polity* (Dharwar 1974) 39-41, on Ikkeri; S. Kadhivel, *A History of the Maravas, 1700-1802* (Madurai 1977) 34, note 4, on Ramnad; B. Stein, *Vijayanagara* The New Cambridge History of India I, part 2 (Cambridge 1989) 133, on all kingdoms considered here; R. Burling, *The Passage of Power. Studies in Political Succession* (New York and London 1974) 58-61, on the Marathas in general.

patterns. Last, I will offer a few tentative explanations for the differences between these patterns.

Successors and observers

All three kingdoms can be considered successor states of the erstwhile south Indian Vijayanagara Empire. Founded around the 1330s, Vijayanagara started disintegrating in the sixteenth century, leading to about half a dozen successors which largely survived into the eighteenth century.⁴ Paradoxically, most of these kingdoms already came into being as increasingly autonomous polities at the time when the empire as a whole reached its zenith in the early sixteenth century. Therefore, the courts of Vijayanagara and its offshoots were politically and culturally closely related, to the point of having, to some extent, a common court culture. This applies, for instance, to various aspects of royalty, such as legitimation, coronation rituals, and representation in literature, art, and architecture.⁵ At the same time, the successor states differed from one another in fundamental ways, including their dynastic origin and geopolitical characteristics.

As for the origin of the three dynasties discussed here, the Nayaka rulers of Ikkeri arose from local chiefs who first had been incorporated as vassals into the expanding Vijayanagara Empire and later, as the empire fell apart, grew more or less independent. Ramnad's royal house, the Setupatis, was formed by local chiefs too, but in this case through secession from another Vijayanagara successor state (that of Madurai). In Tanjavur, the initial dynasty – also called Nayakas – gained power by ascending Vijayanagara's military ranks and attaining an increasingly autonomous governorship in an area they did not originate from. Tanjavur's later Maratha house also consisted of foreigners, who conquered the kingdom in

⁴ For a general work on Vijayanagara and its successors, see Stein, *Vijayanagara*.

⁵ See e.g. P. B. Wagoner, "'Sultan among Hindu Kings": Dress, Titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu Culture at Vijayanagara', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55.4 (1996) 851-880: in particular 868-871; P. B. Wagoner, 'Harihara, Bukka, and the Sultan. The Delhi Sultanate in the Political Imagination of Vijayanagara' in: D. Gilmartin and B. B. Lawrence ed., *Beyond Turk and Hindu. Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamic South Asia* (Gainesville 2000) 300-326: 314; G. Michell, *Architecture and Art of Southern India. Vijayanagara and the Successor States* The New Cambridge History of India I, part 6 (Cambridge 1995) passim; and Stein, *Vijayanagara*, 130-136.

the 1670s.⁶ With regard to the kingdoms' geopolitical features, Tanjavur encompassed a fertile river delta, which was densely populated. Ramnad was largely situated in a semi-arid region, whereas Ikkeri mostly comprised an upland wooded zone, apart from a low-lying coastal strip. These two latter kingdoms were comparatively sparsely inhabited.⁷

In sum, the political culture of the three courts was shaped by several factors, including a partially shared legacy of the Vijayanagara Empire, the various dynastic origins, and the geopolitical aspects of the kingdoms. Somewhat surprisingly, Vijayanagara and its successors together have hardly been studied from a comparative perspective so far.⁸ This essay is thus to be considered an initial, brief attempt to compare one aspect of the court cultures of three successor states that together cover the abovementioned range of dynastic and geopolitical diversity.

In this paper, my research of dynastic successions is chiefly based on the archives of the Dutch East India Company.⁹ The Dutch maintained

⁶ The standard secondary works on these dynasties are all rather outdated and stand in need of revision; on Ikkeri: K. D. Swaminathan, *The Nayakas of Ikkeri* (Madras 1957); on Ramnad: K. Seshadri, 'The Sētupatis of Ramnad' (unpublished dissertation, University of Madurai 1976), and Kadhirvel, *A History of the Maravas* (Madurai 1977); on Tanjavur: V. Vriddhagirisan, *The Nayaks of Tanjore* (Annamalainagar 1942), K. R. Subramanian, *The Maratha Rajas of Tanjore* (Madras 1928) and C. K. Srinivasan, *Maratha Rule in the Carnatic* (Annamalainagar 1943). For a (non-outdated) chronology of the Tanjavur Marathas, see also S. Subrahmanyam, *Penumbra Visions. Making Politics in Early Modern South India* (New Delhi 2001) 144-152.

⁷ O. H. K. Spate and A. T. A. Learmonth, *India and Pakistan. A General and Regional Geography* (London 1967) 683-687, 700-703, 762-779; F. R. Hemmingway, *Tanjore Gazetteer* (Madras 1906, reprint New Delhi 2000) 2-10, 54, 91-92, 146-147; R. R. Rao, *Ramnad Manual* (Madras 1890) 15-22; B. Lewis Rice, *Mysore. A Gazetteer Compiled for Government II* (London 1897, reprint New Delhi 2001) 367-375, 415-426.

⁸ But see e.g. V. Narayana Rao, D. Shulman, and S. Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance. Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamilnadu* (Delhi 1992), which discusses the courts of three relatively similar successor states, those of the Nayakas of Tanjavur, Madurai, and Senji (or Gingee).

⁹ In the future, as part of my PhD research within the Eurasian Empires programme, I intend to use Indian and Portuguese sources too, in order to study dynastic successions (and describe them in much more detail) as well as other aspects of court politics, such as legitimation, ritual, and factionalism. Furthermore, my research will include Vijayanagara in addition to the three kingdoms discussed in this essay, and be foremost of a comparative nature, with the main question

coastal trading stations in all three kingdoms and from there kept a close watch on the inland courts.¹⁰ They generally compiled detailed reports whenever a throne became vacant and a new ruler was installed. Largely unexplored, these records have much to contribute to our hitherto limited knowledge of these occasions, including some entirely unknown, albeit short-lived, kings. In the historiography on the dynasties in question, so far mostly based on inscriptions and chronicles produced by the courts themselves, successions are mostly described as peaceful events. As will become clear, the Dutch got a rather different impression. They were never personally present at these courts when successions took place and got their knowledge from spies, interpreters, merchants, local authorities, and the like, but these informants were often well-connected to courtly circles.

Besides, the Dutch strived to pursue a neutral policy when it came to dynastic successions in these three kingdoms and had no real interest in the outcome of the accompanying struggles, other than the wish that new rulers – both on and behind the throne – would adhere to the trade agreements concluded with their predecessors. Reasons for the Dutch to report on successions in so much detail included the need for local officials to explain to their superiors how these occasions often led to kingdom-wide disorder, which in turn affected trade and lowered profits. Moreover, the Dutch needed to know how the balance of power at the court changed with every succession. It seems they never attempted to influence the outcome, however.¹¹ By and large, they adopted a pragmatic attitude, trying to

concerning the extent to which the legacy of the empire's court culture lived on in its successors. See: <http://hum.leiden.edu/history/eurasia>.

¹⁰ These trading stations included Nagappattinam in Tanjavur, Kilakkarai in Ramnad, and Kundapur/Barcelore (or Basrur) in Ikkeri. For introductory works on the Dutch East India Company in India and the archival materials this presence produced, see G. Winius and M. P. M. Vink, *The Merchant-Warrior Pacified. The VOC (The Dutch East India Co.) and its Changing Political Economy in India* (Delhi 1991); and the series of Dutch Sources on South Asia, c. 1600-1825: J. Gommans, L. Bes, and G. Kruijtzter, *Bibliography and Archival Guide to the National Archives at The Hague (The Netherlands) Dutch Sources on South Asia, c. 1600-1825 I* (New Delhi 2001); L. Bes, *Archival Guide to the Repositories in The Netherlands Other than the National Archives Dutch Sources on South Asia, c. 1600-1825 II* (New Delhi 2007); L. Bes and G. Kruijtzter, *Archival Guide to Repositories Outside The Netherlands Dutch Sources on South Asia, c. 1600-1825 III* (New Delhi forthcoming).

¹¹ It is doubtful whether they would have been willing and able to do so at all. Such endeavours would have required large-scale, inland military operations, entailing

cultivate relations with whoever could protect their trade interests at any given time.¹² Because of this combination of a relatively disinterested position and more or less first-hand information, I consider the Dutch reports on successions in the kingdoms in question comparatively reliable, although this does obviously not remove the necessity to be critical of these documents and beware of, for instance, exaggerations, mistaken identities, or even forged stories.¹³

As the Dutch presence in these areas began around 1660 and all kingdoms lost their autonomy about a century later, I will discuss the period in between. During these hundred or so years, the three kingdoms together witnessed about thirty successions, of which I will highlight a few representative ones in the sections below to illustrate a number of general characteristics.

Ikkeri: tactical queens and fingerless pretenders

To start with Ikkeri (also known as Keladi), eleven successions took place between 1660 and 1760, two of which appear to be mentioned only in the Dutch records. While this rather high number already hints to an unstable dynasty, the events surrounding the successions paint a rather grim picture of Ikkeri court politics. In only two cases the king died a natural death and was succeeded by an adult, male, and close relative without too much

high costs without any guarantee of satisfactory results. Even an attempt by the Dutch in 1746 to occupy the relatively small Ramesvaram Island off the Ramnad coast, because of a trade conflict, became a failure, as they had no answer to Ramnad's guerrilla-like warfare. See L. Bes, 'Friendship as Long as the Sun and Moon Shine. Ramnad and its Perception of the Dutch East India Company, 1725-1750' (unpublished MA thesis, Leiden University 1997) 72-81.

¹² The Dutch East India Company obviously did not pursue this neutral policy in various other regions in Asia, such as Malabar (in the far south-west of India) and the Indonesian archipelago, where it was actively involved in the outcome of succession struggles. For a general overview of relations between Asian kings and the Dutch, see E. Locher-Scholten and P. Rietbergen ed., *Hof en handel. Aziatische vorsten en de VOC 1620-1720* Verhandelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 223 (Leiden 2004).

¹³ See also J. Gommans and J. Kuiper, 'The Surat Castle Revolutions. Myths of an Anglo-Bania Order and Dutch Neutrality, c. 1740-60', *Journal of Early Modern History* 10.4 (2006) 361-390: 384-389.

commotion. The nine other successions saw at least four murdered kings (two of them poisoned), many more killed relatives (and two of them blinded), four under-aged kings, two widow-queens, and three kings considered bastards because of adoption or their belonging to an illegitimate branch of the dynasty – with some rulers combining several of these characteristics. These struggles usually caused great disturbances in the entire kingdom, and often generals, royal uncles, merchants, or other courtiers would emerge as those who really exercised power.¹⁴

A description of three successions that took place in the early 1670s will demonstrate how such events would proceed. The first succession, probably in 1672, began with the killing of the then ruling king, Somashekhara Nayaka, a boy of about fifteen years old. He belonged to a collateral line of the dynasty and was said to have spent most of his reign looking after his animals, while leaving politics to his advisors. His death led to a bloody struggle between supporters of the two lines of the royal house and the enthronement of a fourteen-year old boy who was a member of the older branch of the family. Despite his ancestry, however, he was very soon removed from his position by the rivalling court faction. To make sure he would never reclaim the throne, his ear and right-hand little finger were cut off – as a sign of impotence – while his father was blinded. Sadashiva Nayaka, who two decades later wrote to the Dutch for support to expel Queen Chennammaji, was probably a brother of this boy.

After the boy and his father were eliminated, a new, adult king (belonging to the older branch too) was installed, referred to as Kasiyya Bhadrappa by the Dutch. But before long, probably by 1673, he fell out with his initial supporters and was beheaded – together with his son, just in case that boy turned out to be another pretender to the throne. Now, with three kings killed or expelled, some stability finally set in, under the rule of a woman. When Somashekhara, the first of the three kings, had been killed, his widow was supposed to commit *sati* and die with him on his funeral pyre. She pretended to be pregnant, however, and was thus able to postpone her

¹⁴ In addition to relevant references in other footnotes, see e.g. NA, VOC, inv. no. 1236, fol. 35, 191-193, 203-204, 338, 449, 496, inv. no. 1240, fol. 532-533, 544, 584-587, 603, inv. no. 1268, fol. 1113, 1115v, inv. no. 1274, fol. 172v, inv. no. 1295, fol. 264v-266v, inv. no. 1606, fol. 98v, inv. no. 1607, fol. 90v, inv. no. 1694, fol. 75-76, inv. no. 1838, fol. 178v-179, inv. no. 2432, fol. 79, inv. no. 2433, fol. 443v-444, 505v, inv. no. 2435, fol. 2233v-2234, inv. no. 2461, fol. 21v, inv. no. 2857, fol. 36, inv. no. 2928, fol. 93, inv. no. 2929, fol. 248.

death. In the meantime, she allied herself with the military commander Timmanna – who also seemed to harbour royal ambitions as he had himself addressed as Nayaka of Ikkeri and who came into conflict with her later on – and she grew so powerful that no one dared to remind her anymore of the duty of *sati*. In the course of the 1670s she emerged as the ruler of the kingdom, especially after Timmanna died in 1677. This woman was Queen Chennammaji, whose reign horrified Sadashiva Nayaka so much. But despite his view on female rulers, Chennammaji remained in power until she passed away in 1697 and was one of the longest ruling monarchs of Ikkeri. Nevertheless, in what seems to have been an attempt to legitimise her position, she soon adopted a three-year old boy (the future Basavappa Nayaka) to have him crowned king of Ikkeri and ‘reign’ beside her – a real toddler on the throne.¹⁵

Ramnad: meddlesome neighbours and hand-raising commoners

In the kingdom of Ramnad, things were not much different when it came to successions. Like Ikkeri, Ramnad experienced eleven successions between the 1660s and 1760s, and these, too, were characterised by violence and a colourful range of pretenders to the throne. Just five kings died a natural death; the others were killed, imprisoned, or expelled. Unlike Ikkeri, however, widows never became rulers, but young boys – and even a suckling – increasingly often did. From the 1730s onward, the throne was almost permanently occupied by three minors, who commenced their reign at the age of, respectively, five years, thirteen years, and two months. Illegitimate pretenders also stood a good chance of becoming king, as two in-laws of the royal family and one bastard son ruled Ramnad in the early eighteenth century.¹⁶ As in Ikkeri, often the most powerful figures at the

¹⁵ See e.g. NA, VOC, inv. no. 1246, fol. 1619-1620, inv. no. 1288, fol. 635-638v, inv. no. 1291, fol. 586v-587v, inv. no. 1295, fol. 264v-266v, inv. no. 1308, fol. 642v-643, inv. no. 1329, fol. 1331, inv. no. 1406, fol. 913, 915v, 920v, 923v, 931v-932, inv. no. 1474, fol. 210v-213, 329-331v, inv. no. 1593, fol. 7-7v, 864, 872v, 876-876v, 901, 928.

¹⁶ See e.g. NA, VOC, inv. no. 1295, fol. 144-144v, 707v, inv. no. 1302, fol. 613, inv. no. 1788, fol. 1493-1493v, inv. no. 1805, f. 1039v-1040, inv. no. 2026, fol. 834-835, inv. no. 2044, fol. 94v-95, inv. no. 2046, fol. 762-762v, inv. no. 2158, fol. 948v-950v, inv. no. 2337, fol. 1541v-1543v, 1579-1580v, inv. no. 2733, fol. 18-18v, 33v-34, inv.

Ramnad court were not the kings, not even when they were adults, but such courtiers as generals, provincial governors, queen-mothers, and treasurers.¹⁷

If we compare what seems to be two endless chains of chaotic and bloody successions in Ikkeri and Ramnad, however, one difference stands out. In Ikkeri, the pool of throne pretenders and their supporters appears to have been largely confined to the court itself. By contrast, in Ramnad, frequently people from beyond the courtly circles – or even from other courts – played a decisive role in the outcome of succession struggles. Local chiefs living away from the capital as well as neighbouring kingdoms were often actively supporting rival factions at the court. In addition, it seems that the common people of Ramnad, or at least their leaders, usually had to approve of new kings. The Dutch records mention this practice several times. They speak of kings who needed ‘permission of the community’ (*toestemming der gemeente*), were ‘publicly introduced to the people’ in the capital (*den volke aldaar publicq voorgesteld geworden*), were ‘recognised and accepted as their legitimate monarch’ (*voor haaren wettigen vorst erkent en aangenomen*) by chiefs from various places in the kingdom, and the like. The documents also describe a ceremony where courtiers and warriors publicly recognised the new ruler by raising both hands and worshipping him.¹⁸ Admittedly, some of these occasions may have been orchestrated, but it was apparently considered important to somehow involve the public when coronations occurred. In their extensive reports about successions in Ikkeri, the Dutch never referred to anything comparable.

A series of successions in Ramnad in the early eighteenth century illustrates this involvement of external parties in the court’s affairs. In 1710, the dying king, Kilavan Setupati, is said to have expressed his wish to be succeeded by a bastard son, Bhavani Sankara, born of a concubine. But Bhavani was not considered legitimate by the community and the throne thus went to a more acceptable relative, Tiru Udaya Tevar (also known as Vijaya Raghunatha), who was a son-in-law and possibly also a nephew of Kilavan. Bhavani Sankara fled to the neighbouring kingdom of Tanjavur,

no. 2735, fol. 1052v-1053v, inv. no. 2757, fol. 1474, inv. no. 3082, fol. 1156v-1162, 1453-1456, inv. no. 3348, fol. 399.

¹⁷ L. Bes, ‘The Setupatis, the Dutch, and Other Bandits in Eighteenth-Century Ramnad (South India)’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 44.4 (2001) 540-574: 556-563.

¹⁸ See e.g. NA, VOC, inv. no. 2026, fol. 834v, inv. no. 2158, fol. 950v, inv. no. 2337, fol. 1543v, inv. no. 2757, fol. 1474.

but in 1725 – after Tiru Udaya had passed away and the throne seems to have been briefly occupied by Tanda Tevar, another nephew of Kilavan – he finally managed to conquer Ramnad with the help of Tanjavur. In spite of his illegitimate descent, this time Bhavani was even acknowledged through the hand-raising ceremony by most chiefs. Hereupon, two other pretenders – Kattaya Tevar and Sasivarna Tevar, both in-laws of Ramnad’s royal family – fled to Tanjavur. They returned in 1729, also with Tanjavur’s assistance, now to expel Bhavani Sankara from Ramnad’s throne and both claim it for themselves. While Bhavani fled to Tanjavur again, Kattaya and Sasivarna started quarrelling about who was entitled to become the new king. Each enlisted the support of different local chiefs and warriors, and in the end this led to a partition into two kingdoms: newborn Sivaganga, ruled by Sasivarna, and a much-shrunken Ramnad, with Kattaya as king. The outcome of all these successions was clearly influenced by parties outside the Ramnad court, such as local communities, warrior chiefs, and the Tanjavur court.¹⁹



Fig. 1: Mural in the Ramalinga Vilasam Palace in Ramnad, probably depicting King Tiru Udaya Tevar (or Vijaya Raghunatha Setupati) (r. 1710-1725) and some courtiers as they receive European envoys, possibly Dutchmen (photo by the author).

¹⁹ For an extensive description of the events leading up to the partition of Ramnad, see Bes, ‘The Setupatis, the Dutch, and Other Bandits’, 552-556.

Tanjavur: accommodative brothers and sensible usurpers

Tanjavur is the last kingdom I discuss. While it was heavily involved in Ramnad's tumultuous dynastic changes, Tanjavur's own successions generally proceeded quite smoothly. Eight successions took place between the 1660s and 1760s,²⁰ which is not much less than in Ikkeri or Ramnad. But three of these happened within a short and turbulent period (1736-1739) that appears to be rather uncharacteristic for Tanjavur. Whereas both Ikkeri and Ramnad regularly saw kings following each other in quick succession,²¹ this happened only once in Tanjavur. If we therefore consider this period atypical and put it aside, we are left with five successions in this century. These were accompanied by little or no trouble, and only one widow, perhaps one bastard, and no toddler ever sat on the Tanjavur throne. Almost all kings died a natural death and were succeeded by either their son or their brother.²² Therefore, I will examine two successions in the Maratha house that did cause some friction. At first sight, this may seem odd given my intention to discuss dynastic developments I regard as representative, but as this friction was peacefully resolved in both cases, these successions actually confirm Tanjavur's dynastic stability.

In the first case, the throne passed in 1711 from the deceased Shahaji to his younger brother Sarabhoji (or Serfoji), much to the regret of their youngest brother, Tukkoji. Rather than letting this dissatisfaction develop into a serious conflict, however, the problem was solved by appointing Tukkoji as a kind of viceroy of an important province. Initially, this kept him happy, but after some time he grew frustrated again, especially when Sarabhoji, being childless, adopted a boy who might become his successor. Tukkoji then retired from the court altogether, but still had the decency to

²⁰ Not counting a change of dynasty in the early 1670s, when the Marathas replaced the Nayakas after a short Madurai-ruled interlude.

²¹ In Ikkeri: three successions in the years 1660-1664, three in c. 1672-1673, and two in 1754-1757; in Ramnad: three successions in c. 1673, three in 1725-1729, and two in 1748-1749.

²² In addition to relevant references in other footnotes, see e.g. NA, VOC, inv. no. 1398, fol. 406v, inv. no. 1411, fol. 96v, 103-104v, 120, 303-303v, 407, inv. no. 2334, fol. 182v, inv. no. 2350, fol. 118, 438, 578, inv. no. 2351, fol. 3994-3995, inv. no. 2386, fol. 165, inv. no. 2443, fol. 2690-2691, inv. no. 2387, fol. 94-95, inv. no. 2538, fol. 1619, inv. no. 3077, fol. 433-433v, inv. no. 3108, fol. 23-24, 29-30, 92, inv. no. 8866, fol. 129.

ask Sarabhoji for permission. This was granted with all due honours, but when it turned out that Tukkoji was now on his way to leave Tanjavur, Sarabhoji tracked his brother down right at the border and managed to make him return to court voluntarily. Rumour had it that it was actually their mother who kept the brothers on speaking terms. In any case, in 1729 Sarabhoji passed away naturally and Tukkoji finally became king, albeit with some resistance from a court faction that wished to see Sarabhoji's adopted boy on the throne.²³

The second case concerns Shahaji II, the sole king who ascended the Tanjavur throne through usurpation. His reign lasted only a year (1738-1739), after which he was imprisoned by courtiers under the pretext that he was the son of a slave girl and therefore an illegitimate ruler (he may actually have been the adopted son of Sarabhoji). But his intended successor, Pratapasimha (or Pratap Singh), claimed he could not possibly become king unless his jailed predecessor would formally renounce the throne to him. Upon hearing this, Shahaji II had Pratapasimha visit him in prison and told him: 'If you do not accept the reign, we shall both loose our heads, but if we stay alive we can see what will be next, therefore go and sit on the throne'. This proved to be another example of Tanjavur's ability to avoid violence at the court, because now Pratapasimha agreed to become king and Shahaji II was released and given some lands to live from.²⁴

To be succeeded

The main concern of this essay has been to determine the discrepancy in three related kingdoms between the ideal of legitimate succession and the reality of illegitimate rulers and succession struggles. Yet, the question may be asked how we are to explain the dissimilarities between successions in these kingdoms, which after all, to some extent, shared a political and cultural legacy of the erstwhile Vijayanagara Empire. With regard to the

²³ NA, VOC, inv. no. 1803, fol. 98, 302v-303, 467-469, inv. no. 1819, fol. 42v, 170v, inv. no. 1849, fol. 319v-320, inv. no. 1997, fol. 22-23, 18 (2nd numeration), inv. no. 2031, fol. 436-440, 1359, inv. no. 2043, fol. 144v, inv. no. 2147, fol. 4833v, inv. no. 2166, fol. 69-71, inv. no. 8844, fol. 45.

²⁴ NA, VOC, inv. no. 2427, fol. 425, 435-436, 441v, inv. no. 2442, fol. 608-610, 633, inv. no. 2443, fol. 2034-2036, 2690-2691, inv. no. 2470, fol. 70-72, inv. no. 2471, fol. 51-52. The quote of Shahaji II also in Subramanian, *The Maratha Rajas of Tanjore*, 44.

rather striking difference between Tanjavur on the one hand and Ikkeri and Ramnad on the other, one might argue that during the period in question Tanjavur was mostly ruled by the Marathas, who originated from western India and had conquered the kingdom, and therefore its court culture may have had not much in common with that of Ikkeri and Ramnad, the more 'direct' successors of Vijayanagara. But under Tanjavur's previous dynasty – the Nayakas, who started as Vijayanagara governors – successions also appear to have been peaceful affairs that happened few and far between. In the Nayakas' case, a period of not less than 140 years was covered by the reigns of just four kings, each a son of his predecessor, with the obvious exception of the dynasty's founder.²⁵

Hence, the differences in succession politics can perhaps be explained by various other factors. One of these may be the kingdoms' societal structure of which the courts were part. As explained above, Tanjavur was situated in a fertile riverine area, supporting intensive wet-land agriculture and a dense, largely sedentary population. Already since pre-Vijayanagara times, it consisted of highly stratified communities, with little social mobility and a strongly institutionalised and divinely ordained dominance of kings and priests. This may have limited the influence of outsiders on dormant tensions at the court. By contrast, Ramnad was located in a semi-arid region, mostly comprising dry waste lands, forests, and thorn-bushes. It had a sparse population, of which semi-nomadic and autonomous herders and warrior bands formed a substantial portion. The kingdom was thus characterised by more fluid and open social relations, which might have made access to the court comparatively easy.²⁶ These differences may have been reinforced by the fact that the Setupatis of Ramnad had local roots and therefore probably held strong—but potentially

²⁵ Vriddhagirisan, *The Nayaks of Tanjore*, 24, 34-35, 57-64, 125-130.

²⁶ For discussions on different geopolitical zones in (south) India, see e.g. P. G. Price, *Kingship and Political Practice in Colonial India* (Cambridge 1996) 9-10; Bes, 'The Setupatis, the Dutch, and Other Bandits', 545-546, 563-566; D. Shulman, 'On South Indian Bandits and Kings', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 17.3 (1980) 283-306: in particular 288-290, 301-306; J. C. Heesterman, 'Warrior, Peasant and Brahmin', *Modern Asian Studies* 29.3 (1995) 637-654: passim; J. Gommans, 'The Silent Frontier in South Asia, c. A.D. 1100-1800', *Journal of World History* 9.1 (1998) 1-23: 2-4; and B. Stein, 'Agrarian Integration in South India' in: R. E. Frykenberg ed., *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (Madison 1969) 175-216: 188, 206.

disloyal – ties with parties outside the court, whereas both the Nayaka and Maratha houses of Tanjavur were of foreign origin and possibly maintained a certain distance from the society they ruled over. In this regard we may remember the reports about the conflict between Sarabhoji and Tukkoji being solved by their mother, while other influences – either dividing or reconciling the brothers – seemed entirely absent.

In the case of Ikkeri, possible links between geopolitics, dynastic origin, and court politics seem harder to discern. With the major part of its territory lying in a wooded upland zone with a low population density and its royal house having local origins, one might suppose the situation to be somewhat similar to that of Ramnad, but although these two courts shared their dynastic instability, we have seen that in Ikkeri disturbances usually originated at the court itself, unlike the various influences that came from beyond the court in Ramnad.

Obviously, this matter awaits more research, and the suggested reasons for the different succession patterns are largely suppositions, which I hope to address in future, together with other possible explanations. At any rate, it is clear that in Ikkeri and Ramnad, unlike Tanjavur, primogeniture and royal blood (either by birth or through marriage and adoption) played only a limited role in the outcome of successions. Royal blood was only a first necessity to partake in the struggle for the throne, and primogeniture served as just one of the many possible additional assets to claim kingship. Often, other factors proved decisive, such as personal skills, connections, and mere luck.

Finally, another question remains unanswered: what happened to Sadashiva Nayaka, the throne pretender who possessed so many qualities to become king of Ikkeri and yet was outsmarted by Queen Chennammaji? His request for military assistance was politely turned down by the Dutch, as it was by the Portuguese and several Indian powers. All the Dutch did was lending him a small amount of money, presenting him some minor gifts, and allowing him to camp at one of their trading stations for a few days.²⁷ Sadashiva had no choice but to continue wandering around south India and devising new strategies to become king – but apparently lacking the right connections and a healthy dose of luck, he would never be one.

²⁷ NA, VOC, inv. no. 1474, fol. 210v-213.