Dutch and British colonial intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780 - 1815: expansion and reform

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INTRODUCTION

Regime change is a much-discussed topic nowadays. It may even have become a tainted one because of the one-sided nature of western intervention in the political process of such countries as Iraq and Afghanistan. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that the process of regime change remains an intangible and rather unpredictable one: the final outcome usually does not concur with the initial aims of the new regime. Indeed, contemporary examples show how the intended reform of former institutions is often hampered by unexpected ideological clashes and the lack of local support for the new regime. Regime change may be the result of internal developments or it may occur as a result of external intervention like in Iraq and Afghanistan. Such intervention is not a recent phenomenon. In the past, Western intervention played an important role in (colonial) state formation processes outside Europe. One of the more interesting examples is the change of regime that occurred in Sri Lanka, where in 1796, at the juncture of the early modern and modern eras, the EIC (East India Company) took over the colonial regime of the coastal regions of the island from the VOC (the *Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie*, or Dutch East India Company).

This study examines colonial intervention in Sri Lanka, or Ceylon[1] as the European powers named it, between 1780 and 1815, a period of worldwide revolutions and imperial change. It tries to explain and analyse the emergence of the modern colonial state on the island, against the background of an increasingly modernizing world. The point of departure is the decennium prior to the British take-over of the Dutch possessions on the island in 1796, when local reforms were carried out by the Dutch administration. These led to a new interplay in the interior between native institutions and Dutch power holders.

Strange enough, while the study of most other regions in Asia in the eighteenth century recently experienced a revival, this particular period has been somewhat neglected in the study of Sri Lanka's history.[2] In the later colonial period, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, interest in the Dutch presence on the island and the *faits et gestes* of the early British governors led to a series of source publications and articles in journals like *The Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, the *Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union* and the *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*. Also, various archivists of the government archives in Ceylon published Dutch source material, in particular the *memories van overgave* (memoranda

written as manuals for successors, upon the transfer of office).[3] Most attention for the Dutch period focused on the early phase, probably due to the fact that these memoranda were published chronologically, starting with the oldest ones of the seventeenth century.

At the same time, increased attention for the early British period resulted in the perception of a strong divide between the British and their Dutch predecessors. The Dutch were pictured as representatives of the *ancien régime*, and the British governors as enlightened and sensible statesmen. Naturally, the British presented their history on the island as one of progress and development. In this era, early Sri Lankan nationalist historians turned to the history of the kingdom of Kandy and treated it with pride, turning the kings and nobles in to heroes and emphasizing the ruthlessness of British imperialism. The last battle between the kingdom and the British was depicted as a battle for independence, foreshadowing the independence struggle of the twentieth century.[4]

Interest in the administrative history under the British increased in the 1920s and 1930s, when the island's administration underwent major changes and was opened up to native politicians.[5] Native and British historians became interested in the origins of the British institutions and political traditions on the island. Father Perera published the Douglas Papers, an important set of documents on which the colonial policy in the early stage of British rule was based.[6] Colvin R. de Silva wrote a solid two-volume account of the British administration in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. After independence in 1949, Kannangara and G.C. Mendis still strongly represented the British tradition by studying administrative developments in the Ceylon civil service and the Commissioners of Enquiry respectively. The first pioneering Sri Lankan studies of the early Dutch period by K. Goonawardena and S. Arasaratnam, both impressive products of work in the VOC archives, also still focused on administrative and political developments. The Kandyan kingdom continued to gain much attention by nationalist scholars.[7]

This tradition of colonial history writing was soon replaced by a nationalist one that blamed the colonizers for under-developing the island. This swing took place in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It became commonplace to regard the first decades of British rule as equally static and detrimental to the island's development as Dutch governance had been. Doing away with the colonial perception that the British instantly brought prosperity to the island, historians like V. Kanapathypillai and U. Wickremeratne argued that both the late Dutch and the early British governments lacked innovative rule.[8] In other words, because neither managed to fundamentally transform or modernize society, both colonial administrations were criticized for their lack of vision and enterprise in the pre-1830 period. Kanapathypillai and Wickremeratne actually

marked the years 1780-1830 as an uninteresting and intermediate period, owing to the declining state of the Dutch East India Company and British unwillingness to take initiatives towards development. In the view of these historians serious attempts in that direction were made only after the arrival of the Commissioners of Enquiry in 1828.[9] As a result, since the 1960s the period has been overlooked by most historians working on Sri Lanka, for the presumed lack of change made further research seem unnecessary.

Java as inspiration

This study investigates this transitional phase and draws its inspiration partly from recent studies that stress the importance of the eighteenth-century foundations of the modern colonial states of Java and India. A connection between Sri Lankan and Javanese history may seem far-fetched now, but in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dutch Company servants often compared the two. From a colonial perspective the comparison certainly makes sense: on both islands tensions with the native kingdoms in the interior led to intrigues and alliance making, to extensive open warfare and eventually to the expansion of Dutch territorial power. In contrast to most of the other VOC strongholds in Asia, colonial administrations were set up on these two islands to rule the expanding territorial possessions. In addition, both built up a considerable population of European settlers in the port cities, maintained large garrisons and were regarded the centre of Dutch power within their Southeast Asian and South Asian contexts respectively.

As the historian Jurrien van Goor recently showed, the colonial parallels run even further into the nineteenth century: both experienced a transition from Company-run to state-run colony during approximately the same years. Ceylon was taken over by the British in 1796, and after a short period of EIC rule it was placed under the responsibility of the Crown in 1798. At about the same time the VOC went bankrupt and the responsibility for Java was taken over by the state. In 1811 Java seemed headed for the same colonial fate as Ceylon, when the British occupied Java during the Napoleonic wars. But Java returned into Dutch hands within five years, while the British continued to hold on to Ceylon. The political unification of Ceylon and Java through the conquests of the interior kingdoms Kandy in 1815 and Mataram in 1830 respectively, is yet another parallel that complements the story of the emergence of the colonial state on these islands.[10]

In the case of Java, the bankruptcy of the VOC in 1799 is traditionally

considered a watershed between the old, declining and corrupt Company's regime and the modern, profitable, state-run colony it was to become in the nineteenth century. The same thing happened in Sri Lanka. Because the British take-over took place almost simultaneously with the fall of the VOC, Sri Lankan historians conveniently hold on to a similar chronology, equating the emergence of the modern colonial state with the arrival of the British. In contrast to Sri Lankan historiography, modern studies of the colonial intervention in Java transgress the traditional divide and depict the late eighteenth century as a crucial stage in the colonial state formation process and the formulation of new modes of exploitation. Historians revealed much continuity in colonial practices between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, by showing the role that native agents like commercial and political elites played in the creation of the colonial state. The origin of the cooperation of these groups with the Dutch lay in the eighteenth rather than in the nineteenth century.

At the same time, historians started to recognize that although from the Company perspective the late eighteenth century might have been a period of decline, the policymakers on the spot were increasingly involved in the exploitation of the interior and expanding further to the peripheral regions which lay a basis for the colonial exploitation systems of the nineteenth century. Although this thesis deals exclusively with the history of Sri Lanka, it was inspired by these new approaches, especially those regarding the history of Java. Recent work by Robert Van Niel and Hui Kian Kwee on Java's North East Coast and Atsushi Ota on Banten emphasize the dynamic character of the period, in contrast to the traditional image of a declining and rusty Company administration on Java.[11]

Early nineteenth-century state builders like Daendels depended heavily on the legacy of Dutch-Javanese interaction in the eighteenth century. Perhaps they modernized it in some ways and made it more efficient, but ultimately they did not fundamentally change it. This did not even happen after the Dutch incorporated the remaining autonomous indigenous state of Mataram in Central Java in 1830. In fact, Johannes van den Bosch managed to turn the eighteenth-century practice of exploitation into full profit for the colonial state when he developed his *Cultuurstelsel* in 1830, a cultivation system based on forced cultivation. The period of British rule in Java under Governor Thomas Stamford Raffles (1811-1816) seems to have been an exception, as these were years with an air of more radical modernization based on what we now consider superior moral precepts like free labour. However, Raffles' failed efforts to change the modes of exploitation and administrative institutions on the island are often used to show how strong the indigenous institutions had grown from the eighteenth century onward. This has led some historians to sug-

gest that the impact of colonial policies as such was truly limited and that Dutch and British rule on Java were interchangeable.[12]

It is the complex interplay between the native response to economic and political challenges that the European presence in Asia brought along on the one hand and the actual European colonial aims on the other that has caught my interest. The new insights in Javanese history made me question the traditional periodization of Sri Lanka's colonial history, but at the same time I wondered whether the Sri Lankan case might help us understand the process of colonial state formation in Java and elsewhere, especially because it was ruled by two different European colonial governments. What did the last decades of Dutch rule on the island look like, and what picture emerges if we connect developments in Sri Lanka of the late eighteenth century with those in early British times?

It is worth noting that in any case the British Imperial context was very different: in contrast to the declining Dutch empire, that of the British was on the rise. For a long time historians viewed the period as one of uncontrolled and radical British expansion, in which colonial policymaking was absent or at least not structurally implemented. Yet recently Chris Bayly, in his all-encompassing *Imperial Meridian*, pictured a new image of the British Empire in this period when he argued that besides the expansion and consolidation of British power through superior methods of warfare, it was most certainly a period of conscious colonial state formation. He showed how this expansion and the discussions among British officials about the best way to exploit the new colonies, fostered the development of a British imperial ideology that in turn reinforced the rise of nationalism in Britain. At the same time, Bayly emphasized that the British colonial governments set up in the various regions around the world in this period were in practice as much based on native collaboration and local institutional traditions as on British colonial principles.[13]

Bayly's conclusion is written in the same vein as the research on Java discussed above. If the eighteenth-century foundations of the Dutch encounter in Java counted so much for the later shaping of the colonial state, one may wonder whether this was also the case in Sri Lanka. It legitimizes questions about how the Dutch presence affected Sri Lanka in the eighteenth century and how the British dealt with the Dutch legacy. Bayly actually touches on the case of Ceylon and surmises that on the island the British built not only on native structures but also on the Dutch legacy. It was of course beyond the scope of his book to deal with this subject in depth. He does not explain how the British colonial input and principles related to those of the Dutch predecessors or what exactly were the native responses to Dutch and British policies.[14]

Points of analysis

In this thesis I intend to unravel the complex triangular relationship between Dutch and British colonial precepts and indigenous response in Ceylon by relating intentions of policymaking to decision-making processes and practices on the spot. By viewing the period 1780-1815 as a transitional stage in the island's colonial history, I hope to bring to the surface the dynamism that seems so typical for this period elsewhere in Asia. This should lead not only to a new synthesis of this period in Sri Lanka's political history, but also to a new characterization of transitions of colonial regimes in Asia during this revolutionary era.

Inspired by the literature discussed above, I will focus on three major subjects. First, I will investigate the political formation in the coastal region, by analysing the colonial administrational organization and systems of inland exploitation. Due attention is given to native agency in the colonial state-formation process through the analysis of the relationship of both European powers with the local elites and Eurasian communities. Second, I will analyse the views the Dutch and the British held on their own presence and territorial power on the island and see how these influenced their attitudes and political intentions on the island. Third, I will study the relationship between the kings of Kandy and the Dutch and the British respectively. The subjugation of the kingdom and the consequent formal political unification of the island in 1815 is placed in the long-term perspective of the island's political history and connected to the interior policies of both European powers.

Unfortunately very few indigenous sources for the period under study exist. The only indigenous sources I was able to use were letters written by Kandyan nobles to their relations in South India, translated and published from Tamil and Sinhalese in the 1930s.[15] The *Cūlavamsa*, the chronicle of the Kandyan kingdom basically ends in 1782.[16] Therefore, the study is based on the primary source material, official and private, written 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 have studied the Dutch period of Sri Lankan history, like Arasaratnam, Goonawardene, Kotelawele and Wagenaar, have focused mostly on the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century.[17] Kanapathypillai is an exception; his unpublished PhD thesis covers the last thirty years of Dutch rule. His work is of a rather descriptive nature and he situates his research in the context of a Company in decay and not in that of a changing world. Consequently he does not contest the traditional image of stagnation presented above.[18] Others have mostly relied on his work and on the published and translated sources like the already mentioned *memories van*

overgave. However, these published sources do not cover the last decades of Dutch rule.

British sources, government papers, private correspondences and contemporary publications sometimes provide an extra perspective on the Dutch period, but I have used them primarily to examine various aspects of British governance. Although much more has been published on the early years of British rule in comparison to the Dutch period, it still remains a poorly understood period because of the various shifts in policy and changes of institutions. These have been described by able historians like Colvin R. de Silva, but they have not been interpreted or placed in the context of either changes in the Dutch period or contemporary developments elsewhere in the British empire. Of course the research presented in this thesis owes a lot to the existing literature and in my conclusion I will point out how the research contributes to contemporary debates.[19]

Reflections on the sources

The Dutch and British source material is found in archival institutions in London, The Hague, Jakarta, Chennai and Colombo. This global distribution of sources on Sri Lanka is directly related to the administrative organization of the Dutch and British colonial empires. Before 1800 the Dutch establishments in Asia were all part of the VOC, which had as its highest authority a board of directors in the Netherlands, *De Heren Zeventien*. The board was composed of representatives of the Company's six chambers.[20] The records of the Company's central administration in the Netherlands are now found in the National Archives in The Hague.[21] In Asia, the Ceylon government fell under the authority of the *Hoge Regering* (High Government) of Batavia (now Jakarta) the VOC's headquarters in Asia. The Dutch government in Colombo had to report on all commercial and political affairs to both the *Heren Zeventien* and Batavia.

The material in Jakarta and The Hague consists of extensive letters and reports with appendices that were sent from Colombo as well as the instructions sent back to Colombo. The correspondence was very extensive: the *Nationaal Archief* in The Hague holds more than fifty bundles of papers sent home from Colombo during the last fifteen years of Dutch rule, under the header of *Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren*. The papers in Colombo give a direct reflection of the local government. That is why, although much information can be found in despatches preserved in The Hague, the material in Colombo such as the minutes of the political council, the central governing body on the island, and its correspondence

with the outposts give the best insight into the functioning of the local administration and the decision-making processes involved.

In the early years, the British administration in Sri Lanka was controlled by the government of the EIC headquarters in Madras (Chennai). From 1798 onwards, the government grew apart from Madras and when the government of Ceylon was placed directly under the Crown in 1802, there was only a commercial relationship left between the two administrations.[22] Therefore, most of the source material outside Sri Lanka for the period after 1798 is found in the Colonial Office archives at the National Archives in Kew – no less than seventy-five bundles with despatches from Ceylon covering the first twenty-five years of British rule. In addition to this "regular" set of papers, the National Archives hold thirty-two bundles containing materials collected by the Commission of Inquiry between 1829 and 1831. This commission was installed in order to investigate certain general aspects of the government of the colony since 1795, like the colony's revenue, agricultural policies, the organization of the civil service and the department of justice, and in particular the issue of slavery and unfree labour.[23]

As is true of the Dutch papers, the materials in Colombo give a more direct impression of the functioning of the local government and administration. There are also differences that are directly related to the administrative organization of the colonial governments. For example, the British governors ruled without a political council and therefore we do not get much insight in the decision-making process on the island. In fact, the organization of the sources of the two colonial governments gives some insight into their respective administrative histories. We find that Governor Willem Jacob van de Graaff (1785-1794) installed a department for inland affairs in 1786, which suggests that he displayed a greater interest in the inland affairs than did his predecessors.[24] The lack of regular correspondences with the outposts until 1806 in the British case suggests that up until then the central government in Colombo did not have a firm grip on the affairs in the outposts.

In addition to official administrative sources, archives in the Netherlands, Sri Lanka and London also possess private correspondence of government officials. These sources provide additional information and perspectives on current affairs, sometimes countering the official information in the sources. One example is the private correspondence of the advocate fiscal (later chief judge) Alexander Johnstone in the National Archives in Sri Lanka, which consists of all sorts of letters ranging from dinner invitations to secret reports for the government. The correspondence with Governor Thomas Maitland (1805-1811) is especially interesting because it shows the strong ties between the two men. Another case in point are the letters by Pieter Sluijsken to various high officials of the

VOC, which are kept in the private collections of The Hague.[25] Sluijsken left an enormous stack of papers, owing to his ongoing feud with Governor Van de Graaff.[26] These papers offer information found nowhere else, but they need to be treated with care. Just because they were written privately does not mean they inherently hold more significance or 'truth' than official papers.

The abundance of source material for the period under research is problematic. The Dutch and British sources form a *mer à boire*. Selections were made on the basis of the very useful catalogues and indexes available in the various archival institutions.[27] In the case of the British sources, the existing literature and published sources, like the Douglas papers[28] and Bertolacci's description of Ceylon,[29] helped focus the research.

Chapter outline

The thesis is in three parts. The first gives an introduction to Sri Lanka's early history and briefly discusses the Portuguese political infiltration and the Dutch arrival on the island. It deals more extensively with the emergence of the Kandyan kingdom as the major indigenous political power on the island and analyses its political organization. The purpose is to give a long-term perspective on the European intervention on the island. At the same time it serves as a reference point for the later chapters that deal with the Dutch and British administrations and the Kandyan relations.

The second and largest part of the thesis discusses the colonial transition under Dutch rule at large. The three major research questions of the thesis are considered here. Chapters Two to Four deal with the changes in the practice of colonial rule in Dutch Ceylon over the eighteenth century, with an emphasis on the last fifteen years. Chapter Five discusses the Dutch colonial outlook in the last decades prior to the British take over and Chapter Six deals with the Dutch relationship with Kandy.

In the third part of the thesis, Chapters Seven to Eleven, the British experience is discussed and placed in the context of the findings for the Dutch period. The three research questions are dealt with in the same order as in Part Two: Chapters Seven to Nine discuss colonial practice under subsequent British regimes; Chapter Ten relates the colonial ideals expressed by the British rulers to developments and discussions on colonial rule elsewhere in the British empire and Chapter Eleven discusses the final subjugation of the Kandyan Kingdom. In the final analysis of Chapter Twelve the research as a whole is brought together and discusses how these findings contribute to the existing literature on Sri Lanka and colonial regimes of the period in general.