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

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PART TWO
THE FIRST COLONIAL TRANSITION:
LOCAL GROWTH OF COLONIAL INTERESTS

CHAPTER TWO

COLONIAL POLITICS IN DUTCH CEYLON TILL 1780

This chapter discusses in greater depth the early encounters between the Dutch merchants and the inhabitants on Sri Lanka. The aim is first of all to understand how the Dutch government came into being and took shape and what inland policies were implemented. Second, the chapter focuses on the question of the actual impact of the Dutch government on local politics and society and discusses the relation between the Kandyan Kingdom and the Dutch. The comparison between the organization of the Dutch and the Kandyan administration in the last part of this chapter sheds light on possible Dutch deviations from local traditions, and gives us an understanding of the functioning of the system of indirect rule and the colonial political culture that developed in the maritime districts. The chapter serves as the point of departure for the analysis of developments on the island after 1780 presented in the following chapters.

2.1 *Early developments*

After the 1680s the emphasis in Dutch rule was on the southwestern districts of Galle and Colombo because of the cinnamon production, and on the Jaffna peninsula because of its fortunate location in the Indian Ocean trading networks. From the thirteenth century onwards these regions had developed as the maritime mercantile centres on the island, and this continued under the Dutch. The two regions formed the core areas of Dutch rule, while the rest of the possessions on the island were really peripheral. Financial and practical considerations were the basis for the organization of the Dutch government on the island. The Portuguese system of indirect rule, in turn based on the indigenous form of government the Portuguese found there, was largely taken over by the Dutch. The degree of interference with local society varied, however, depending on the economic importance of a given district to the Dutch East India Company.

The Southwest was where the Dutch obtained the cinnamon, their key product. The cinnamon collection required a certain level of organization and relatively intensive involvement from the VOC administration. Cinnamon was taken from the inner bark of the cinnamon tree, and this had to be peeled off and processed through the existing indigenous caste-based labour-system. The *Saligamas* (or *Chalias*) formed the cinnamon-peeling caste, hence they collected and prepared the cinnamon for the

Dutch as part of their *corvée* labor. Their department, called *mahabadde*, was put under control of a Dutch officer, the captain of cinnamon (*kapitein der kaneel*). Because cinnamon grew wild throughout these districts, it was important to keep a check on lands that were cleared for cultivation. In fact, though *chēna* (shifting cultivation) had always been an important element of indigenous subsistence agriculture, the Dutch tried to restrict this to the forestlands where not one cinnamon tree was to be found. This was one bone of contention between the Dutch and the native population, and led more than once to wide-scale rebellions.⁸⁵

The strong emphasis on cinnamon collection and the mobilization of one particular social group in its collection and production led to irreversible social changes. Over time, the *Salāgamas* gained in status, not because of their peeling activities for the Dutch as such, but because of the privileges they received for these activities. Therefore, by the end of the eighteenth century they had risen from one of the lesser to one of the higher castes. This example of social change is often referred to by historians who attempt to assess the influence of Dutch rule on society in the southwestern districts.⁸⁶ There were however more aspects of Dutch inland policies that really affected local society.

As mentioned above, money had to be raised from sources other than the cinnamon collection, to pay for the government's expenses on the island. The main source was regular commerce, which was best developed in Jaffna. The profits of Jaffna were mostly derived from the trade in the island's export products such as elephants, areca nuts and chanks. Moreover, the Company issued heavy import duties on products which competed with their own stock, such as textiles. Arasaratnam has pointed out how the jealous trade policies of the VOC in Jaffna led to a decrease in indigenous long-distance trade. Between 1680 and 1740 the Company's attitude towards local commerce shifted a few times between a purely monopolistic and a more regulative one. In the latter case, import duties and market taxes proved a good base of income for the Dutch. This attitude finally prevailed, but the shifting policies seriously harmed the position of Sri Lanka in the trading networks of the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the taxes were farmed out against high profits, and this created a new opportunity for native entrepreneurs to invest and increase their capital.⁸⁷

Trade activities in the south were mainly conducted by Muslims and *Chetties* from South India. In this area coconut and areca nut were the main export products, while the Indian traders brought cloth and rice to the island. As in Jaffna, the Dutch taxed their imports, and demanded an *oeliam* tax of fourteen days' service labour in return for being allowed to stay on the island. This tax could also be paid in money, but their labour came in handy in the docks of Galle, where there was always a lot of work

to do. Galle was the main port of the island for the large East-Indiamen travelling between Europe and Batavia.⁸⁸

Additional revenue was gained from the taxation on the produce of the land, of which the paddy culture was the most important. However this tax never yielded enough to sustain the requirements for the garrisons and the VOC officials. Therefore, from the beginning of the Dutch presence rice was imported from Batavia, Bengal and Coromandel.⁸⁹ In general, the type and level of the duties, in the case of both produce and labour, were based on old customs. This gave the Company the legitimacy to levy these taxes. For the collection of the taxes, the VOC administration depended much on the local knowledge and co-operation of the headmen. It was already pointed out above that the systems of land-possession and bonded labour were quite complex. As a result, the Dutch decided to continue the old practice of registration of land and people, called land- and head-*tombos*.⁹⁰ Even when from the mid-eighteenth century on most taxes were farmed out to the highest bidder, the Company still needed the headmen for advice. This relationship with native headmen is an important aspect of the colonial administration and will be further elaborated upon in the section on the organization of inland government.

2.2 Contradicting policies and subordination to Batavia

With trading activities decreasing and expenses growing, the island did not yield enough income. Therefore, from the 1730s Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff started to actively stimulate agricultural production, first in his capacity as governor of Ceylon (1736-39) and later as governor-general in Batavia (1743-1750). He reasoned that local economic improvement would lead to better sales of the Company's products on the island and thereby increase the revenue. He focused both on cash crops like coffee and pepper, and on subsistence agriculture. During his four years in office in Ceylon he energetically endeavoured in the development of the infrastructure and irrigation in the southwest and he made plans to restore the ancient Giant's tank near Mannar. Van Imhoff did his utmost to stimulate people to grow the cashcrops in their gardens. His successors, Van Gollennesse and Loten at first continued this line of approach.⁹¹

The coffee and pepper production took off well, but Batavia ordered a stop to their cultivation because they were competing with Javanese coffee and pepper. The historians D.A. Kotelawele and K. Goonewardena have pointed out how this led to disappointment on the island because many inhabitants had started to grow these crops in their gardens and set up plantations, stimulated by the advantageous price they were to get for it. While coffee and pepper production was hampered by the Company's

superiors, the coconut plantations, which had also expanded, were stopped in the 1750s because they took up land where cinnamon trees used to grow. At that time the cinnamon production was declining and had to be more protected than ever.⁹²

An interesting case in this context is the quarrel of *opperkoopman* Casparus de Jongh with Governor Schreuder, because it shows that the natives were not the only ones engaged in growing coffee and coconut; these had also become important crops for some of the Company's personnel. One of these, Casparus de Jongh, commander of Galle, lost a lot of money because of Batavia's sudden check on Ceylonese pepper and coffee. The investments he had made in a plantation near Galle were lost because the property could not be sold at a profit. After his return to the Netherlands he wrote a furious pamphlet which was published in 1767. In this he also criticized Schreuder's protective measures in favour of the cinnamon tree and against the cultivation of wastelands. He pointed out that this was useless and that all the wild cinnamon trees could be spared while the rest of the land was brought into cultivation. In fact, if cinnamon trees were surrounded by pepper-gardens, it would be easier for the cinnamon peelers to reach them. Casparus de Jongh even added a poetic "Ode to the pepper gardens" (*lof der pepertuinen*) to this pamphlet. Finally he proposed that cinnamon should be cultivated on plantations rather than collected in the wild, for this would solve many of the problems on the island.⁹³

The attempts to improve subsistence agriculture were in the end not much more effective. Van Imhoff tried to stimulate people to occupy new lands and to clear new forests for cultivation, for example by arranging that people could till the soil for five years without taxation. But as with the coconut-gardens, when his successors realized that this could hamper cinnamon production, they lost interest.⁹⁴ Even though the effects of these policies were minimal, it was really a turning point in Company's policy on the island. Earlier on, the Company had only interfered with the practice of commerce on the island; now it revealed an interest in agriculture. For the first time the idea that improvements in the island's economy and living standard could be advantageous to the Company took hold. However, cinnamon, the Company's key-product, continued to stand in the way of structural development of the land. Moreover, the emphasis was still on the core areas – Jaffna, Colombo, and Galle; the other districts remained virtually untouched by these developments.

Even though the outcome of his policy was limited, Van Imhoff's reputation as a reformer lasted until British times: early in the nineteenth century Jacob Burnand, who served the VOC in the 1780s and 1790s and remained on the island after the British take-over, praised Van Imhoff while denouncing many of his predecessors and successors:

The particular interests of men in office, egotism, folly, and something beyond a want of energy in the general government, have formed almost continual obstacles to a stable plan for a general amelioration of the condition of the island; and with the exception of the Gov. gen. van Goens and Van Imhoff, there are scarcely any to be found who, in the early history of the colony, appear to have had its welfare in view.⁹⁵

The whole episode also reveals how much the government of Ceylon was subordinated to the over-all interest of the VOC. Basically, the monopolist and mercantilist attitude of the Company drove the Ceylon government into a corner. Batavian policymakers saw Ceylon as the periphery of their empire and Java as the centre; therefore the island had to serve the interests of Batavia and was not to compete with Javanese products. At the same time, the government of Ceylon had to sell the Company's products on the local market, which undermined the local trading networks and had a negative effect on the local economy. The experiments of the 1730s show that Colombo could not easily embark on an independent line of policy to improve the local situation. This was a continuous problem in the eighteenth century and lay at the root of much political tension between Colombo and Batavia.

2.3 *A policy for Kandy*

During his struggles with the Portuguese and the later tug of war with the Dutch the position of the king of Kandy was strong and his government centralized and geared to the job. Yet, by the last quarter of the seventeenth century, when the king and the Dutch settled for a peaceful coexistence on the island, the king had to reconsider his position in the island. After the wars were over diplomatic relations between the two powers had to be retained through exchanges of official embassies. The historian Tikiri Abeyasinghe stresses that it was only in the early eighteenth century that these embassies became a regular feature of Dutch-Kandyan relationship. Analysing this relationship during the long peace between 1688 and 1740, he concluded that in this period the embassies became more and more institutionalized. This was connected with a growing sense of identity on the part of the Kandyan king on the one hand, and a relative decline of Dutch power in the region on the other. He argues that because these embassies were now performed regularly and the Dutch travelled to the palace to pay honour and bestow gifts, the king perceived them as vassals of his state. The Dutch envoy usually arrived in Kandy in the beginning of April, just before the Buddhist New Year, when all the king's subjects paid their *dākum*.⁹⁶ The subordination of the Dutch to the Kandyan Kingdom was reinforced by the kneeling and bowing rituals that the

Dutch ambassadors were expected to perform during their visits. The growing sense of Kandyan identity was certainly reinforced by the revival of Buddhism in the Kingdom in the 1690s, a development that reached its height in the 1740s and 1750s.⁹⁷ In contrast, S. Arasaratnam has convincingly argued that although the Kandyan kings were politically dominant, in their own domain the Dutch kept a firm grip on the island by isolating the Kandyans from the outer world.⁹⁸ They basically controlled the external trade of the Kingdom and its communications with South India and other Buddhist kingdoms like Arakan, Pegu and Ayuthaya. As a result the court of Kandy remained heavily dependent on the Dutch.

Until the 1750s, the situation on the island was as follows: the VOC was dependent on the Kandyan king for the legitimacy of its power on the island, and was therefore formally considered his vassal. In practice, the Kingdom of Kandy largely depended on the Dutch for all communication and trade with South India. The only way for the Kandyans to put pressure on the Dutch was by denying them permission to peel cinnamon in their territory. This obliged the Dutch to continue sending embassies, even though they perceived the rituals they were forced to perform as increasingly degrading.⁹⁹ The so-called cohabitation lasted for almost seventy years, but from the 1740s onwards, tensions between the two powers increased. The Kandyans became more and more determined to have their ports back and not to be hindered in their South Asian trade and overseas contacts. At the same time the Dutch realistically began to consider their position on the island as more significant than that of mere vassals and felt that they ought not to be forced to perform the submissive rituals at the yearly embassies.

The developments that followed were complex and characterized by vague intrigues among the nobles of the Kandyan court, the Dutch government and headmen of the maritime districts. L. Dewaraja and D.A. Kotelawele have described how internal developments in the Kingdom, the establishment of a new royal dynasty and the rise of Buddhism, changed the attitude of the Kandyan king towards the Dutch. They also explain how the Dutch in turn attempted to make use of internal strife and intrigued with certain court officials.¹⁰⁰ In the end, two events triggered the outbreak of a war between the two parties in late 1760, which would last until February 1766. Hostilities began with Kandyan support for a rebellion in the southwestern district of Matara, in reaction to the implementation of Governor Jan Schreuder's rigid agricultural policies against *chēna* cultivation and the coconut plantations. Second, there was a plot by certain monks and nobles to depose the king, with possible aid from the Dutch. Thus, both governments were trying to extend their own power and undermine the authority of the other through alliances with disaffected chiefs. Clearly a new crisis was at hand.

The Kandyans first managed to overthrow some of the VOC forts, but after the arrival of reinforcements from Batavia, the Netherlands and the Indian factories, the Dutch managed to get a grip on the situation. After taking back the old possessions, Governor Lubbert Jan van Eck (1762-1765) decided to march on the Kandyan capital. For some months in 1765, the Dutch troops managed to keep hold of Kandy, but lack of food and supplies and constant guerrilla-like provocation by the Kandyans, led them to withdraw. About half a year later, on 14 February 1766, both parties signed a peace treaty. This was in all respects advantageous for the Dutch and underlined their military superiority on the island. The Dutch access to the coasts and ports gave them a logistical advantage and they could readily import supplies of men, weapons and foodstuffs. This also meant that the Dutch had access to better weapons and a relatively better quality of troops of European, Malays and Sepoys from India.¹⁰¹

This war marked the last violent attempt on the part of Kandy to extend its authority on the island and to gain access to the maritime corridor. The VOC now decided the terms of the relationship and could no longer be seen as a vassal of the king. The new power balance was fixed in a treaty: the Dutch would never again be forced to perform the degrading rituals before the king and the Company would not be hampered in the collection of cinnamon in the king's forest. Dutch possession of the entire coast was also fixed in the treaty and ensured for ever the isolation of the Kandyan Kingdom. The balance of power had shifted to the VOC and heralded a new phase in Dutch policy on the island.

2.4 Prelude to change

The open warfare between Kandy and the Dutch and the eventual recognition of Dutch dominance on the island generated a new dynamism in colonial policymaking on the island. The treaty of 1766 with Kandy secured the Company's right to peel cinnamon freely in the king's territories and its territorial possessions were expanded. From then on, the areas east of Matara and south of Batticaloa were in Dutch hands, as were the western ports Putalam and Chilaw and their hinterlands. Although the collection of cinnamon was secured, it was decided in Batavia that it would be better if the Dutch started with the cultivation of the cinnamon tree in plantations around Colombo. Governor Van Eck had worked out such a plan during the war, but it had not been put into practice. The idea was that this would make the Dutch even less dependent on the Kandyans and the collection of cinnamon would become a much easier job. Governor Falck (1765-1785) was asked to experiment with these plantations already in 1767, and after a hesitating start these really took off from the late 1770s.¹⁰²

Falck occupied the office of governor for twenty years and he has been portrayed as someone who wanted to prevent any disturbances in the country whatsoever and who was therefore wary of major changes. With the exception of the cinnamon production, which was actually decided upon by his superiors, this seems to be an accurate picture. In these twenty years, Falck took no initiative to begin new projects. He basically sought to maintain peace and order and did not interfere much with the inland government of his *dessavas* and *commandeurs*. However, his subordinates did take some initiatives and the “cinnamon solution” implied some relief from the strict policies towards agriculture.¹⁰³

For example, two large agricultural projects were started in the districts of Colombo and Galle in the 1770s. Initiated by the *dessava* of the district De Coste, the one near Colombo involved reclamation of the marsh land north of Colombo stretching halfway to Negombo called Muturajawela. This large enterprise was to make about 6,000 acres of land ready for paddy cultivation by draining the salt water and ensuring the provision of fresh water in the dry season. The Company paid for the operation and attracted people to move to the marshes and expected to recoup its investment easily by the tithe on the crops.¹⁰⁴ The plan was drawn out on a nice map showing the plots of land to be created by the drainage.¹⁰⁵ In the case of Diviture, an estate north of Galle, irrigation canals were constructed to regulate drainage of the superfluous water in the wet seasons. This was a joint venture of a group of Company officials. While Muturajawela was to produce only paddy, Diviture was also considered suitable for garden culture and the production of cinnamon in particular.¹⁰⁶

Both projects failed at this stage, but they do reveal a basic change of policy. Private investment in land was again considered profitable after the discouraging measures of Schreuder, and the government invested actively in the development of subsistence agriculture. It was however under Falck's successor Willem Jacob van de Graaff that the enterprising inhabitants of the island were actively stimulated to develop the country and that the officials in the outer regions were stimulated to improve and increase the paddy production. How these increased agricultural activities relate to the decline of the Company that took place from the 1780s, is the subject of Chapter Three.

2.5.1 *Administrative organization in Dutch Ceylon – Company superstructure*

The second part of the eighteenth century witnessed a changing balance of power to the advantage of the Company. It also experienced an

increased interest in agriculture as a private and public source of wealth. It gives the impression that VOC power over the interior was rising, but what remains rather vague is how this power was distributed. To fully understand the impact of the encounter with native society, it has to be established how Dutch rule trickled down society and in what way the colonial administration deviated from local traditions in the execution of its power. It seems likely that the system of indirect rule was becoming less indirect, due to the Company's growing interests in the interior. Therefore, I will argue, in line with Colin Newbury's recent study on indirect rule, that such a system was never static and much depended on the respective bargaining positions of the colonial and native powers. Newbury stresses the dynamic features of indirect rule by pointing out how real power and initiative usually lay first with native collaborators. In fact the colonial overlords did not have a choice in collaborators, but had to rely on those who put themselves forward. The real power over the inhabitants developed gradually as the colonial centre grew in strength over time.¹⁰⁷

The government of the coastal provinces of Ceylon comprised two parts. First there was the VOC superstructure, which consisted solely of European officials in the service of the Company. The second was made up of native officials or headmen who were recruited from the highest castes. The government was supported by the garrisons distributed among the various forts along the coasts, and in times of tension along the borders with Kandy as well. Their presence enhanced the Dutch power vis-à-vis local society. Though officially there was a strict distinction between the civil and military establishments on the island, in practice there was some overlap between the two.

The highest authority in the organization of the Dutch East India Company lay with the *Heren Zeventien* ("gentlemen seventeen") in the Netherlands. These men were representatives of the six chambers, situated in six port cities in Holland and Zeeland, and of which Amsterdam had the largest share. In Asia, they were represented by the governor-general and the council of India, also commonly referred to as the High Government of Batavia. Orders for Ceylon usually went through the High Government.¹⁰⁸ The governor of Ceylon had to give account of all government affairs to both Batavia and the *Heren Zeventien*. Not only was the governor in charge of commercial matters, civil government and the military establishment, he also had the highest authority in the local judicial system. He was assisted by a political council, which normally consisted of eight to ten members, all Europeans who held the highest positions in local government. Officially the governor could not decide anything without the approval of the council, but in practice he was the most

powerful and influential man on the island. Decisions regarding the island community made by the governor and his council were communicated through official decrees or *plakkaten*. These decrees were composed in Dutch and, when necessary, in Tamil and Sinhalese as well.¹⁰⁹

The political council was set up in a strict hierarchical manner, which is illustrated by the fixed rules for the following order of seats around the conference table. This structure of government was quite similar to that of the other of the Company's possessions, although Ceylon ranked among the most important. The governor of Ceylon was an *ex officio* member of the council of the Indies. The higher officials in the political council of Ceylon held Company ranks of *opperkoopman* (head merchant), *koopman* (merchant), *onderkoopman* (submerchant) and were paid accordingly. The names of these ranks point at the mercantile origin of the government, although in many cases the functions they performed had more to do with civil government than with purely commercial affairs. In the council, officials from all sectors of government – commerce, justice, inland administration and the army – were represented.¹¹⁰ At the start of our period, the political council consisted of the following persons: Willem Iman Falck, governor; Bartholomeus Raket, commander of Jaffna; Arnoldus de Lij, commander of Galle; Daniel de Bock, head administrator; Jan Jacob Coquart, Major; Jacobus de Bordes, trade bookkeeper (*negotieboekhouder*); Martinus Mekern, secretary; Cornelis Dionisius Kraaijenhoff, first master of the warehouses; Cornelis de Cock, *dessava* (bailiff) of Colombo; Jan Hendrik Borwater, fiscal and payments accountant.¹¹¹

After the governor, the commanders of Jaffna and Galle respectively were the highest-ranking officials, but they only attended the meetings of the council if they happened to be in Colombo. At the local level their government took the same shape as that in Colombo, therefore they headed their own political councils in their *commandementen*. The commanders of Galle and Jaffna also issued their own decrees that concerned specific local circumstances. At the smaller places of extraordinary strategic or economic importance, but far away from the three main centres, an *opperhoofd* (chief) was appointed. This office was often held by military commanders, as in Trincomalee or Kalpitiya.¹¹² At Tuticorin, on the Madura coast of India, which also fell under the authority of the Ceylon government, a civil servant held the post of chief.

In total there were about sixty basic administrative functions ranging from governor to commercial bookkeeper (*negotieoverdrager*) in Galle.¹¹³ Apart from these so-called qualitative ranks, many more people were employed as clerks to support the administrators. These were not necessary Europeans, but often the offspring from mixed marriages between Europeans and natives. In other cases these jobs were filled by military

servants who desired a change of career when their contract ran out. Though this was discouraged by the Company, it was not checked locally. Company employees received fixed salaries following Company guidelines, but the highest office-holders also received the revenue from villages that were assigned to them as long as they stayed in their posts, the so-called *dispens dorpen*. It was also common for these officials to receive a share of the revenue from the various taxes, and they had the right to make use of the corvée system for their private affairs. Often they gained additional income through the appointment of the native officials, who, following local tradition, paid them a sum on appointment. This tradition was called the giving of *paresses*.¹¹⁴

The Company servants did not specialize in one sector and during their career a servant could move from the position of *fiscaal*, dealing with juridical matters, via the position of trade bookkeeper, to the function of *dessava* where he had to deal with inland administration. We do know, however, that there were regional preferences. Although there was no general rule in this respect, people often moved from function to function either around Jaffna and Tuticorin, or they stayed in the southwest. Acquaintance with language and culture played a part in these choices – Jaffna and Tuticorin were Tamil-speaking regions, while Colombo and Galle were Sinhalese – but local connections counted probably just as much. Of course those with high ambitions did not stay on Ceylon for the whole period of their Company career, but moved up the ladder via the various factories in South Asia to return to the island as commander or governor.

In general, the Company system of administration was highly bureaucratic. Reports had to be sent from all sections to the governor in Colombo. He and the political council would go through these and summarize them for the High Government in Batavia. When necessary they sent full copies of the local reports. All resolutions of the political council were sent to Batavia and the Netherlands and were accompanied by long letters in which each decision and happening was accounted for. A *visiteur* regularly went through the books of each place to check the finances.¹¹⁵ Though it may seem so in theory, in practice it was certainly not a watertight system. Most servants found a way to make some money locally within the margins of this system, for example through local trade or by lending money at high interest rates.¹¹⁶

The military establishment of Ceylon was much larger than the civil department. In fact, with usually about two-thousand-five-hundred men in garrison spread all over the island this was a very expensive department. Consisting of Europeans, Malays and South Indian Sepoys, many of these troops stayed on the island for long periods and married locally. Some of the Europeans decided to pursue a civil career on the island or continued

living on the island after the end of their contract as a civilian, burgher. By 1780, the larger part of the civil and military servants on Ceylon had lived on the island or the nearby factories for a long time, if they were not born there like Governor Falck himself. As a result many of the local employees of the Company had put down roots and their private interests and local connections on the island and with the nearby Indian factories must have been extensive. From the mid-eighteenth century, private agricultural enterprise was a new development. Casparus de Jongh made large investments in pepper gardens during his commandorship in Galle, and in the 1770s members of the political council like Arnoldus de Lij and Pieter Sluijsken invested their money in the Diviture project. They were both typical examples of the generation of rooted servants, having arrived on the island in the 1740s and 1750s and staying on until their death. People like them usually owned large estates on the island, but operated from one of the three large towns of the islands.¹¹⁷

By the 1760s the colonial settlements of Colombo, Jaffna and Galle had grown into real towns with military, economic and administrative functions. This urbanization was a new phenomenon and was certainly not to be found in Kandy. Colombo and Galle counted a population of about eighteen hundred men, besides the garrisons, and the inhabitants were of mixed ethnic origin. The towns were large enough to require a separate administration. Many of the typical town institutions such as orphanages, estate administration (*boedelkamer*), garbage collection, civil militia, hospitals and so on were copied from the Netherlands.¹¹⁸ A survey of the *plakkaten* reveals that most of the proclamations of government dealt with the administration and legislation of the towns. At the same time, as Lodewijk Hovy notes in his recently published compilation of the *plakkaten*, there was a considerable increase in proclamations in the native languages from the second quarter of the eighteenth century. This concurs with the image of increased colonial intervention, discussed earlier on in this chapter.¹¹⁹ These towns also had their specific port functions and their markets took in a central place. As we have seen, these also had to be administered to ensure the income of duties upon the imports and the sales. Other activities in the town included the reparation of government buildings for which the Company had master carpenters in service.

The town populations consisted of both Europeans and natives and the offspring of mixed marriages. It seems paradoxical, that though mixed marriages were the order of the day, there was a very strict hierarchical division in the grade of one's "Europeaness". Indeed, only the full-blooded Europeans could hold the highest positions.¹²⁰ Although these towns reflected the European presence on the island, a strict division between town and countryside did not exist. For example many inhabitants of the towns, both European and natives possessed land under cultivation in the

surroundings of the towns (*gravetten*). Also, labourers were brought from the countryside to perform their regular corvée labour on the docks, maintaining the fortifications or in other construction works. The administration of the countryside was however of quite a different nature and so was the European impact there.¹²¹

Within this context a brief discussion of the juridical establishment is necessary. The Europeans were involved in two main types of courts, the civil town court (*civiele stadsraad*), and the court of justice. These courts were present at each administrative centre. The civil town court dealt with civil cases and marriages and although it was set up in the three main towns, its jurisdiction spread also over the immediate hinterland. After 1740, the court consisted of three burghers and four Company servants. The court of justice dealt with all criminal cases and civil cases where more than 120 *rijksdaalders* were at stake. The court of justice also comprised seven members, but all had to be Company servants. In certain cases it was possible to appeal to the court of justice in Batavia. The court of justice was also concerned with semi-judicial tasks like the calibration of weights and measures. Each court of justice had a fiscal assigned to it, who functioned as prosecutor in criminal cases. The fiscal was also concerned with the daily jurisdiction over the inhabitants and their estates within the town boundaries.¹²² In the eighteenth century, special *landraden* (civil courts) were established to deal with inland matters in which natives played an important role, but these will be discussed below.

2.5.2 Administrative organization of Dutch Ceylon – Indigenous input and indirect rule

Below the Dutch superstructure the native administrative system continued to operate. This was organized on a regional basis and there were regional differences in organization and legislation. The native administrative system originated in the old kingdoms and was taken over by the Portuguese. The Dutch had kept it intact where possible, since it was their aim “not to disturb society or to disrupt institutions, but rather derive profit that the country afforded through the existing channels”.¹²³ This was certainly true for the peripheral regions like the Vanni and the east coast where tribute in the form of elephants or paddy sufficed and the Company did not demand anything more and did not interfere with the local rulers. In the case of the core areas of Jaffna, Colombo and Galle, one may wonder in how far this was true and how indirect rule functioned in these areas.¹²⁴

The highest native official was the “*mahāmudaliyār* of the governor’s gate”. He was the main advisor of the governor in native affairs and in the

relationship with Kandy. He was even actively involved in the correspondence between the Dutch and Kandy, because he translated all letters. The commander of Galle also had a *mahāmudaliyār* as an advisor, and this person was often related to the *mahāmudaliyār* in Colombo. In a way the function of these *mahāmudaliyārs* could be compared to that of the *adigārs* in the Kandyan Kingdom because of the advisory task and the proximity to the governor of these officials. But they did not have as many responsibilities and they did not have such a status among the European officials, even though their prestige among the lowland Sinhalese may have been high.

The *dessavas* (provincial heads) were really in charge of the inland administration and they were appointed in the core areas of the Company Jaffna, Colombo and Galle. Despite its indigenous name, the *dessavas* were actually European officials and they were the second person in the district hierarchy, after the commander. Galle had a *dessava* for the Matara *dessavony* (district) and an *opziender* (overseer) for the interior of Galle, or Gale *corle*. The *dessava* was responsible for all inland affairs, from the collection of taxes to the administration of justice. Just as in Kandy there was a chain of command down from the *dessava* at the provincial level to the *majorals* and *vidānēs* at the village level. Communication from the Dutch trickled down this system via the *mudaliyārs* and *koraals*, the first native officials below the *dessava*. Originally, the *mudaliyārs* had been in charge of the inland guards, the lascarins and for the transport of timber. The *koraal* was in charge of the collection of taxes and the execution of bonded labour. But in practice these functions were often combined in one person, in which case they were still called *mudaliyārs*. The *attepattu-mudaliyār* functioned as translator and guard of the *dessava* and was the most powerful headman in the *dessavony*. In Jaffna the system was quite the same, although sometimes functionaries had different names; for example a *mudaliyār* could also be called *adigār* there. The main difference between the Sinhalese and the Tamil regions lay in the legislation and customary rules regarding taxation. The means of administration were – at least from the Company's point of view – virtually the same.

The *mudaliyārs* formed the backbone of the inland administration because they functioned as intermediaries between the colonial rulers and their subjects. As a result, they were very powerful men in their districts and they were in the position to manipulate all information. Although the *mudaliyārs* usually came from certain families of the *Goyigama* or *Vellale* caste only, the functions of the *mudaliyār* and the *mahāmudaliyār* were not hereditary and the Dutch were in the position to remove someone from office when they thought fit. This meant that the Dutch had a check on the *mudaliyārs* and that they had to perform to the satisfaction of the Dutch. In practice the situation was a bit more complex because of the

closeness of *mudaliyārs* to the people, their local knowledge and their personal power in the region. The Dutch always feared that they would instigate a rebellion and entice Kandyan support.

The *mudaliyārs* and other headmen were not paid in money but received lands in *accomodessan*. This manner of remuneration was similar to that of the Kandyan Kingdom. The people who inhabited the villages in question had to till the soil for the headman, without compensation. Again these lands were not hereditary, but it did happen that fathers were succeeded by sons and that the lands remained in the family. It was not only via these *accomodessans* that the Dutch could induce the loyalty of the *mudaliyārs*. They also made use of ceremonial occasions to enhance the status of the *mudaliyārs* when they were content with their performance. For example a lot of value was attached to the gold medals of honour that the Dutch occasionally distributed to those *mudaliyārs* whose activities encouraged others to follow suit.

The relationship between the Company's officials and the native headmen was decided not only by official policy. As in Kandy, it was common for the headmen to present their superiors with gifts (*paresses*) upon appointment. This turned into a lucrative business for the officials of Jaffna, Galle and Colombo. The accompanying rituals enhanced local power of the commander both in private and in official affairs. That is why many Company officials also benefited personally from keeping up the indigenous system. The comparison with the political culture in Kandy can be taken further.

Just as in Kandy, the work department or *badda*, ran parallel to this administrative system. This system was caste-based and each caste had its own appointed headmen. These headmen held much less political power than the *mudaliyārs*, unless it was a department that was of use to the Company, such as the cinnamon or elephant department. In the case of the cinnamon department, the native chief was in fact replaced by a European. Here yearly rituals were performed when the cinnamon peelers presented the governor with *paresses* to reinforce the subjection of the cinnamon peelers to the Company, and at the same time to single them out and praise them for their performance during the previous year. During these *paresses*, the whole cinnamon department gathered in Colombo, the peelers danced and drummed for the governor and the governor handed out medals to those who performed best. The rituals of these *paresses* best reveal the influence of the local political culture on the daily practices of the Dutch administrators. The governor, originally a merchant, took up the role of king; perhaps not as divine as the king of Kandy, but with just as much bravura.¹²⁵ It is not entirely clear how the other *badda*-departments functioned and how much the Dutch made use of it, nor how much the Dutch interfered with these sections prior to

1780. But as shall be seen later, from that time onwards, the Dutch grew more and more interested in it.

2.5.3 Administrative organization of Dutch Ceylon – Managing indigenous power

That the Company lorded over the native collaborators was not unique, but fits the general pattern of indirect rule in Asia; similar practices were found, for example, on Java. As long as the Company rule was really indirect as it was in the Vanni or along the east coast, the relationship with the native collaborators was relatively smooth. The relationship became complicated as soon as the Company started to meddle with the inland affairs as a result of growing interests in the interior. This was certainly the case in the southwest and to a lesser extent in Jaffna, there expansion of colonial interests went hand in hand with conflicts and competition with the native headmen over land and labour resources. Therefore the Company was continually trying to find ways to undermine the power of the native headmen, while at the same time it heavily depended on this group of people for the colonial administration. In that way, it did not differ very much from the situation in the Kandyan Kingdom.

The Buddhist establishments played an important part in the organization of the Kandyan Kingdom, and they functioned foremost to counterbalance the power of the aristocracy. In the Dutch area religion played a strategic role in the countries' organization, but in a slightly different manner. From the beginning the Dutch had propagated Protestantism in the areas under their control to counterbalance the Portuguese Catholic and Kandyan Buddhist influence. The strongest measures were taken against the Roman Catholics, who were encouraged to convert to Protestantism. All Catholic establishments like churches and schools were taken over by the Protestants. By 1780, the position of the Catholics was marginal and the Company continued to trouble them with onerous marriage regulations and other things. The measures against Buddhism faded over time. What remained the most important issue in that respect was that *mudaliyārs* and other headmen had to be Protestant to be qualified for the job. Often they converted to Protestantism in name only and remained practising Buddhists.¹²⁶

The school system that was set up in the context of this religious policy was originally meant to teach Protestantism properly to the children. In the southwest they actually built on a tradition of Buddhist village schools, which had first been turned into catholic schools by the Portuguese. In the north, where Portuguese missionary activity had been most intensive, a network of village schools and churches had also come into being. The schoolmasters were appointed by the *dessava* and their

task was to instruct the children properly. In practice, the indigenous schoolmaster, who was based in the villages, often functioned more as official registrar than as religious instructor. He kept a record of births marriages and deaths in the villages under his supervision and people had to pay for these registrations. The schoolmaster remains an obscure figure in the inland administration and it is difficult to assess exactly the power of these men. Because of their administrative function as registrars the schoolmasters could have functioned as a counterbalance against the power of the *mudaliyārs*. Through their records, the Dutch could get a view of society and keep some grip on the people independently of the *mudaliyārs*.¹²⁷

From 1740, several *landraden* were established to deal with civil disputes and minor offences in the interior and at the smaller stations. The *landraad* was installed by Governor van Imhoff as an institutional innovation to assist the *dessava*, who earlier had to deal with cases alone. The native headmen were involved in the *landraad* because they were much better acquainted with the local situation and the customary laws. Interestingly, the customary laws of some groups were much better known than others. The Hindu code of law, or *Thesallavami*, was written up by the Dutch early in the eighteenth century and was usually applied in the Tamil districts. Islamic law was applied to the Muslim traders and the Malays. No clear description of Sinhalese laws existed, therefore the advice of the *mudaliyārs* was necessary, although in many cases Dutch Roman law, which applied to the Europeans, was referred to when considered more suitable. The composition of the *landraad* varied from place to place, but in general half consisted of natives. In some places like Matara, the *landraad* functioned as a court of appeal against decisions of the *dessava*; in others like Jaffna the *dessava* made his decisions in consultation with the *landraad*. The *landraad* was also in charge of the land registration and issued title deeds.¹²⁸

The land registration was something which was taken up by Van Imhoff in the same period, again to counter the power of the *mudaliyārs* and other headmen. So far the Dutch had relied on them to know who possessed which lands and what portion of its produce was due to the government. The same counted for the personal services which the people were supposed to perform for the government. Convinced that the headmen were manipulating the situation and that the Company was losing revenue, Van Imhoff decided to register the people and the land. The Portuguese had had a similar registration called a *tombo*, which they had probably taken over from their predecessors of the Kotte kingdom. It was a huge project, for which the *dessavas* had primary responsibility. It began in Jaffna and was later taken up in the Colombo and Galle districts. Van Imhoff's *tombo*s proved practical, but even though the books were kept up

to date by the *landraad*, many mistakes were made and after about ten years the books became useless and a new registration campaign had to be undertaken. Similar registrations were undertaken in the 1770s and 1780s. The *tombos* are perhaps the most manifest examples of the growing Dutch interference with local society in the eighteenth century.¹²⁹ In contrast to the *landraden*, which were welcomed as new institutions, the land- and head-registrations were not readily accepted at the time, and the natives even rebelled against them. Nonetheless, it should be pointed out that they served as references in land disputes well into the twentieth century.

Another way of limiting the Company's dependency on the headmen was to take away the function of tax collection from them and to farm it out to the highest bidder. In this way the Dutch ensured an income from the land, while competition at the auctions in August drove up the price. The Company had the right to refuse the highest bidder if they thought him unreliable. The person who "won" the privilege had to pay his bid at once or in three monthly instalments. This system had become common in all fields of taxation in the course of the eighteenth century and made it possible for men of substance to invest their capital and increase their income. Thus it opened up native administration to outsiders like the Muslim traders and the *Chetties*, who had money to invest.¹³⁰ This subject is still rather obscure and has not been touched upon much in the literature, but will receive more attention in the following chapters. The organization of bonded labour was not farmed out in this manner, but remained the responsibility of the headmen.

2.6 Conclusion

The commercial aims of the Dutch East India Company dictated the shape of its government and the development of its policies. Colonial administration really centred on the three major towns and regional administrative centres, while inland affairs were dealt with indirectly. However the problems in the cinnamon department and the need to finance the government with profits from local taxes and trade drew the Company further inland. It meant that the Company got more and more involved locally, which in turn required the creation of new instruments to control the native headmen.

In all, the Dutch ruled the interior of the island through a dynamic system of indirect rule. The power relations between the native headmen and the Company were under continuous development. In the southwest, the Company increasingly tried to control the affairs of the headmen in order to achieve the aims of government. In some cases it had to compete with

these headmen for local resources of agricultural products and labour. The Dutch tried to tackle the autonomous power of the headmen by bureaucratic devices like the *tombo* registers. The new agricultural policy of Governor Schreuder, to protect the cinnamon trees, made the relation between the headmen and the Company even more difficult, for the policy went entirely against their interests. There were also differences in the form of indirect rule between the core regions and the peripheral regions like the Vanni in the north, which was really governed from a distance and without interference from the Company.

After a long period of peaceful coexistence, the relationship with Kandy deteriorated in the 1750s. This went hand in hand with the social unrest in the southwest as a result of Governor Schreuder's restrictive agricultural policies and political unrest and succession struggles in the Kingdom. The war between the Kingdom of Kandy and the Company between 1762 and 1766 resulted in a new balance of power to the benefit of the Company thanks to its logistical and material advantages. It did not result in the Kingdom's collapse, but it did lead to its further isolation.

The most important difference between the Kandyan and the Dutch administration was of course that while the Kandyans ruled the interior as a kingdom, the Dutch ruled according to the balance sheet. The governor never held the same sacred status that the king did, even though he tried to compensate for this by observing old rituals like the *paresses*. While the king tried to maintain his power by a policy of divide and rule among his nobles, the Dutch used an extensive bureaucracy as a means of checks and balance. Perhaps the most successful institutional innovation of the Dutch were the *landraden*, the authority of which in relation to small civil cases and land disputes was easily accepted by the natives and the headmen alike. However, often enough it appeared that the bureaucracy did not fulfil its aim entirely and that the Company had to fall back on the practice of divide and rule. The headmen had to be bound to the Company by gifts and rituals just as in Kandy. In fact, even among the Europeans, personal relations with the governor played an important role in their career track which relied for a large part on his good-will.