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

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CHAPTER TWELVE

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

12.1 *The first and second colonial transition: long-term processes*

The period 1780-1815 in Sri Lanka was marked by increased colonial intervention, a process put in motion first by the Dutch colonial regime and later by the British. Whereas at the beginning of the period colonial power was limited to the coastal strip, except for some of the cinnamon-producing areas further inland, at the end of the period the whole island, including the last autonomous Kingdom of Kandy, was subject to colonial rule.

The period stands out as one of expansion and reform, instigated by a mix of local and international factors. Changes in international trade patterns caused a decline of VOC income and forced the regime on Ceylon to search for new resources locally. At the same time local administrators were influenced by some of the exponents of the European enlightenment, in particular the economic ideals first expressed by French *économistes* and later enlarged upon by Scottish moral philosophers, that countries (and colonies) needed their own basic agrarian foundation. As a result, the focus of the colonial regimes shifted from the coast to the interior and plans to develop the interior led to a more intense colonial infringement of local society than ever before. Shifting political relations in Europe and competition for power and resources in Asia resulted in a sense of insecurity among the Dutch on the island. The political instability of the Kandyan Kingdom and the international political insecurity – first during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch war and later during the Napoleonic wars – combined with the everlasting search for new resources, greatly influenced political-decision making. These factors even made the consecutive Dutch and British governors on the spot susceptible to the temptations offered by some nobles of the court to bring the Kingdom under colonial authority.

At the end of the eighteenth century, the function of the island of Ceylon changed from the perspective of the European colonizers. Ceylon developed, after some detours, from cinnamon supplier into an exploitation colony with coffee as its basic produce. It is clear now that this process had already taken off in the late eighteenth century, during the VOC regime, despite the Company's decline. As suggested in the introduction, these developments in Ceylon compared in many ways with

those in Java and elsewhere in Asia in the same period. As in Java, the first outlines of a colonial state became visible in the last decades of VOC occupation, and the process of colonial encroachment continued in the British period. The colonial transition on Sri Lanka was, like elsewhere, marked by four processes: the formal political unification of the island under the flag of the colonial regime, the shift from trading colony to exploitation colony, the inward focus of the colonial administration and concomitant centralization of colonial power, and finally the formalization and rationalization of relations with native power holders and the fiscal and judicial administration of the interior.

The changes did not come about suddenly but were preceded by a slow path of increased intervention that accelerated in the 1780s under the governorship of Willem Jacob van de Graaff, when the governor was compelled to respond to shifts in global trading patterns. Both the Dutch and British governments anxiously searched for ways to make the colony profitable, to maintain it as a strategic foothold and to enrich the financial interests in the mother country. In contrast to the policymaking of the British regime, which was directed to a large extent from Britain and founded on the Indian experience, the Dutch intervention built on time-honoured local experience, and the local initiative for change lay with the men on the spot. This is one reason why the Dutch and British systems of government that developed on Ceylon during this period of transition were not quite similar, even though for most of the time they aimed at similar goals.

12.2 *The colonial interplay: characteristics of Dutch and British rule*

Why a study of this period as a whole has not been written before is hard to say. It may have had to do with a lack of interest among present-day historians in the history of colonial policy-making or simply be the result of the language barrier. Most historians dealing with Sri Lanka's history do not master the Dutch language and therefore find it difficult to consult the Dutch sources. As a Dutch native speaker I did not face these hurdles, but I must confess that the incorporation into one study of two bodies of source materials belonging to two very distinct administrative traditions was not always easy. The switching back and forth between the different organization of the material, writing style and rhetoric on the one hand, and actual distinctions in policy, thought and colonial relations on the other is a challenge in itself. However, a growing familiarity with the various types of source material eventually helped to strengthen my grip on the nuts and bolts of the colonial transition process. In the end it led to new insights that enabled me to challenge the traditional periodiza-

tion of colonial policymaking in Sri Lanka. My archival research has shown that, not unlike other regions in Asia, Ceylon went through an extremely dynamic period at the turn of the century. Colonial aims regarding the island were redirected and the colonial institutions and policies were the outcome of clashes, negotiations and cooperation between the members of native society and the colonial overlords.

In the Dutch period, for example, the cultivation of cinnamon on Company plantations and in private gardens was a novelty, for cinnamon had always been collected in the wild and after a period of experimentation its production was brought under the Company's control. As a result it became possible to loosen the formerly restrictive agricultural policies and develop the interior. The Government leased wastelands on the condition that a part of the land be cultivated for commercial crops like cinnamon, coffee and timber, and that these would be purchased by government at fixed prices. Native headmen and company personnel in particular were encouraged to undertake such agricultural undertakings, which seem to have been facilitated by a successful cooperation between the headmen and servants of the Company, at the expense of the peasants. This is reminiscent of the systems of forced cultivation that developed simultaneously in Java in response to new challenges of the Company there.

At the same time, with the VOC in decline, supplies of basic foodstuffs like rice for the garrisons arrived less regularly on the island than before, leading to food shortages that were aggravated by the increase in the size of the labour force deployed on the new cinnamon plantations which required additional supplies of rice. Consequently, Governor Willem Jacob van de Graaff decided that Ceylon had to become self-sufficient in rice. To achieve this end, Van de Graaff shifted his attention to the peripheral regions on the island, like the east coast and the Vanni and Batticaloa regions which he brought under tight control and where invested in irrigation works and the clearance of new grounds with a view to turning these regions into a *broodkamer* or breadbasket for the rest of the island. He was inspired partly by the remains of great water reservoirs and temples found around the island that gave the impression that the region had once been a rich rice-producing area, and a belief that if only the water reservoirs and irrigation works were repaired and the country was ruled properly, the land could prosper once more.

Colonial intervention in the countryside had always been limited and the encroachment of colonial power did not go unchallenged. While ambitious men like Van Senden, Nagel, and Burnand, inspired by European ideas about progress of society, tried to develop the countryside and to stimulate the cultivation of more land and to increase the agrarian output, the local inhabitants resisted their efforts, which led to clashes

between the Dutch colonial overlords and their subjects. Colonial intervention in the peripheral regions in the east and north not only implied interference with the agriculture, but also administrative changes. Native headmen were replaced by government agents who worked in close cooperation with the colonial officials.

At the same time the government of the island became more centralized and the relationship of the VOC with the native headmen in the southwest, who had played the role of middlemen between colonial government and native society, became tighter and better defined. The original system of indirect rule was transformed into a more direct type of government, in which the native headmen had well-defined task descriptions and were held accountable for their performance. Also the judicial system of *landraden* was scrutinized and its procedures were described by new protocols. The efficiency of the revenue departments increased and Van de Graaff managed to improve the revenue of the colony by fifty per cent. The process of centralization, reform and exploitation was still under way when the British took over the Dutch possessions on the island and turned the administration in new directions.

Progress in the early years of British rule was rather chaotic and vague because of the many shifts in personnel, authority and policy, and because of the strong and contradictory rhetoric used in the despatches sent to London. In the course of this research it became clear that the initial overthrow of the Dutch administrative infrastructure – both in terms of institutions and of native administrators – had features common to other regime changes. Moreover, the various shifts in authority – from Company, to joint Company-Crown and finally to Crown rule – and the previous experiences in colonial policymaking in India appear to have much influenced politics in Ceylon, despite the different conditions in the two places, which helps explain the protracted chaos. Studies of general patterns of regime change helped me focus on the institutional developments and to read beyond the strong intentions of the governors. I found that when Governor Maitland claimed to have returned to the Dutch mode of rule, he basically meant to say that he tried to stabilize the government; but he did this very much in his own way.

Further I investigated how policymakers at home and on the island saw the place of the island within the British Empire as a whole. This view changed a few times. The strategic position of the island was emphasized until changing circumstances elsewhere nullified its strategic value, and the British realized that the colony would have to developed in such a way as to become self-sustaining. When eventually Henry Dundas, the Secretary of State, reached the conclusion that the island should become a granary for the rest of the Empire in 1801, he based his assessments on

the experience in Bengal. His concept for the island resembled the *broodkamer* of Van de Graaff, but this time rice was to be the island-wide focus. The Indian experience had shown that rice was easy taxable and, moreover, commercial crops like coffee and sugar were already grown in the West Indies. This remained the axiom of the British policy until the end of Maitland's term of office. Maitland anxiously tried to make the inhabitants of the southwest increase their rice production, but did not, as the Dutch had done, involve the native headmen in his development schemes. On the contrary, he saw them as obstacles and did everything in his power to diminish their influence.

When his attempts proved to be fruitless, his successors focused once more on commercial crop production, and by the 1820s the coffee culture in the southwest and Kandyan regions really took off. In contrast to the Dutch period, this relied less on the help of the native headmen than on investments and enterprises from Europe. In that way the British clearly opted for a very different system of colonial exploitation than the Dutch.

12.3 *Connecting debates*

Since the 1970s, the study of the long-term development of particular social groups or castes in Sri Lankan society has been a popular subject. Another important issue is the emergence of ethnic consciousness and the origins of the violent divide between Tamil and Sinhalese communities in post-colonial times. Such histories tend to cover a long time-span, often from the fifteenth to the twentieth centuries; in other cases they commence with the British period and continue well into the twentieth century. In both fields of research the period around 1800 is often regarded as a crucial period. Through its emphasis on the eighteenth century, my research contributes to these histories, but puts developments in a new perspective and provides some crucial missing links.

An example of the latter has to do with the rise of the Karāva caste to a socio-economic elite, a development which the historian Michael Roberts connects with the late Dutch period and arrival of the British. I found that the Karāvas had already cooperated with the Dutch in their private enterprises, and took over part of their economic position after the change of regime. Thus, on the one hand the increased private activities of the Dutch gave the Karāvas the opportunities to join their activities, while the change of regime and the economic decline of the Dutch enabled them to step into their shoes. Once again it shows how developments that may seem to have occurred autonomously were actually related to the European presence on the island. This also accounts for the

growth of power of the *mudaliyārs*, native headmen in the southwest, which Patrick Peebles connected to the British take-over, but which clearly had much stronger roots in the eighteenth century when they already became a major landowning class.[656]

Another case in point was found in the analysis of the relationship between the colonial powers and the Kingdom of Kandy. That the Sinhalese nobles deposed of their South Indian king in 1815 and more or less invited the British to rule their Kingdom has been explained by many historians as a manifestation of Sinhalese nationalism (or ethnic consciousness), or by aggressive British expansionism. However, the final collaboration of the Sinhalese nobles with the British can be seen from a different angle and the fall of the Kingdom was really brought about by economic and political factors within the Kingdom. The political balance in the Kingdom was inherently unstable and suffered almost continuously from internal tensions among the nobles, which was reinforced by Dutch intrigues from the 1780s. The Kingdom had been economically isolated by the Dutch, which caused a weakening of the position of the Sinhalese nobles relative to that of the king's South Indian retinue, who still had access to South Indian resources. This drove the Sinhalese nobles away from their king and made them amenable to overtures from the colonial rulers on the coast. Neither ethnic consciousness nor British expansionism seems to have been the decisive factor in this particular case.

12.4 *Clashes, cooperation and negotiation*

If we place the story of Ceylon against the backdrop of global developments, it becomes clear that the changes on the island were part of a widespread phenomenon of modernization in the period under study. It was, however, the personalities of Dutch, British, and Sri Lankan individuals – men like like Van de Graaff, Pilime Talawe, Abeysinghe, Sluijsken, Dundas, Andrews, North, Maitland, Johnstone, Burnand, Koratota, and Eknelligoda – with their specific backgrounds, who played the most important roles in shaping colonial institutions and policies and determined the final form of the colonial state.

The analysis of the relationship between the Kandyan Kingdom and the colonial governments on the island underlines once more the significant role that native elites played in the development of the colonial state. In the absence of more comprehensive indigenous sources, the interplay between colonial challenges and native responses is difficult to interpret. In the Introduction I discussed the colonial transition on Java and pointed out how historians recognize many eighteenth-century foundations of the later Dutch colonial state, and how such foundations were the result of early interaction between the Dutch and the Javanese. In the case of

Ceylon, similar eighteenth-century foundations can be recognized in some instances, but in other cases British rule led to real deviations from earlier colonial and native institutions.

By analysing the differences and similarities, a more complete picture emerges of continuing local pressures, the influence of particular power groups on the construction of the colonial state and specific Dutch, British governmental and individual colonial influence. For example, despite concerted attempts to do so, the British did not succeed in finding native collaborators in the southwest other than the group of headmen that had held power in the Dutch days. However, the relationship they established with this group differed markedly from that of the Dutch. Instead of a convergence of interest as happened in the Dutch period, the gulf between the British colonial government's interests and those of the headmen widened. This was a consequence of British mistrust and attempts to diminish the power of this group by giving them less privileges and authority. Only in the 1810s did they realize, to their own surprise, that this had led to a decline rather than growth in agriculture. Lack of insight into the functioning of local society and an overestimation of their own authority compared with that of the native power-holders was to blame.

This example reveals the limits of colonial power in this period of transition, but also points at the divergence between intention and practical outcome. It shows that the colonial state was the function of a confrontation between the capacities of native society and the demands of colonial rulers. The outcome was not pre-determined by either the social structures of native society or the particular policies of the colonial ruler. Rather it was the result of clashes and accommodations between the two. Thanks to their affiliation with the Dutch in the eighteenth century, the *mudaliyārs* had built up such a strong powerbase that they could not be ignored by the British and had to be given a place in their administrative hierarchy. The case was very different in the peripheral regions where the recent colonial intervention had weakened native power bases. Paradoxically, it was in these areas that the British approach towards the native elite most closely resembled that of the Dutch.

From the very start two major preoccupations distinguished the efforts of British policymakers from those of the Dutch: the practice of justice and the use of bonded labour for the island's exploitation. There was a very strong sense among the British rulers that justice should be in the hands of the colonial government, and not shared with the native headmen as had been the case with the Dutch *landraden.* They experimented with various types of provincial courts, and although for some years the *landraden* were reinstalled, the magistrates eventually took over the real judicial responsibilities for the interior.

The case of bonded labour was even more complex. The notion of free labour as a basic right for all people was an ideal that had become very popular among liberals in Britain. It was reinforced by the idea that improvement of society was only possible within a system of free labour. This had fuelled the abolitionist movement and the reform of the British government in India, and it also influenced British policy on Ceylon. The British governors strongly felt that bonded labour retarded economic growth and consequently obstructed further development of society. After failed experiments with abolition under North, Maitland compromised and allowed bonded labour to be used, but only for public works and the collection of cinnamon. That is why the British preferred to leave the commercial exploitation to European investors who were to pay for the labour they used, rather than to native headmen who appropriated the bonded labour system for all agricultural enterprises.

After a short period of very intensive use of this form of labour by government for infrastructural and irrigational projects, the revived abolitionist spirit in England led to intervention in the labour systems on the island. In 1824, Parliament announced its intention to set up a Commission of Enquiry to look into, among other things, the labour issue on Ceylon. Thus, liberal British opinion with its strong moralist convictions remained a strong element in policymaking on the island, an element absent in the Dutch period, and which remained absent in the case of Java until the Dutch Parliament was given a role in colonial affairs in 1848.

The current study also gives clues for a further comparison between the colonial histories of Java and Sri Lanka. The considerations underlying the choices made by North and Maitland, resemble the "modern" choices made by Raffles, when representing the British Crown on Java. Interestingly one of the members of the Commission of Enquiry, Charles Hay Cameron, had worked with Raffles on Java and drew his inspiration from Raffles' reforms there, when he proposed together with Colebrooke the reform and modernization of the government of Ceylon in 1830. The current emphasis on the eighteenth-century indigenous foundations of the colonial state in Java give the impression that the Dutch government had no choice but to adapt to institutions that already existed and in which the native elites had large interests at stake. The case of Ceylon clearly shows that the way in which the modern colonial state adapted to such foundations depended largely on the preferences and will of the colonial rulers.