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The Ali Rajas of Cannanore: status and identity at the interface of commercial and political expansion, 1663-1723

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CHAPTER SIX

POWER POLITICS IN KOLATHUNADU (1663-1697)

In the month of October 1690, three Dutch soldiers deserted from the Dutch fortress in Cannanore and were caught by the Nayars of the Kolathiri prince, Keppoe Unnithamburan, in Maday—a place some twenty kilometres to the north of Cannanore.¹ Although they tried to hide their real identity by claiming first that they were English and later Portuguese, the Nayars who were sent by the Company to track them successfully exposed their pretensions. Realizing the graveness of the situation, the soldiers desperately pleaded with the Prince not to extradite them to the Company for fear of capital punishment. Moved by their pathetic imploring, the Prince took them under his protection and ordered the Company Nayars to turn back, stating that he would take them to Cannanore personally, which, in fact, did not happen.

The Company servants complained about this incident to the Ali Raja. The latter assured them he would settle the issue by promising to advise and caution the inexperienced young prince regarding this issue. A solution was reached by which the Prince promised to bring the deserters with him to Cannanore and put them under the protection of the 'Chatangodda' temple, situated at the rear of the Bazaar. After much discussion among the princes of Kolathunadu, it was agreed to hand the soldiers over to the Company for 400 or 500 ducats, paid partly in gun powder and partly in lead. Meanwhile, the Ali Raja had some discussions with the *Karanavar* Kuttiyal and the Prince concerning the affair and decided that the *Karanavar* would go to the fort to request and obtain a promise from the authorities that when the soldiers were handed over to the Company, they should not be punished. When this was done accordingly, the *Karanavar* sent a servant to take the soldiers back to the fort. However, in the meantime, the Prince changed his mind and refused to hand the soldiers over. Hearing this news, the Dutch official who was sent from the fort to receive the soldiers decided to return. He was, however, stopped by the *Karanavar*. The *Karanavar* requested the Dutch official not to go back before he could deliver the soldiers to the Company. He added that he would not return to the Bazaar without settling the matter. Taking a sword and shield in his hands, he went in person to fetch the Dutch soldiers, but was stopped by the Nayars near the temple premises. The infuriated *Karanavar* nonetheless confronted the Prince to his face and vowed that he would not give way until the renegades were returned. Although this

¹ VOC 1474, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 31 Jan. 1691, fos. 506r-507v.

created a great commotion among the Nayars as such an incident was unheard of, the Prince gave in to his demands and stepped out from the temple premises in the company of around 2,500 Nayars. Immediately, the Mappilas in the Bazaar followed the Ali Raja grasping their weapons. They, with the prince and his Nayars, moved off towards the coast in a procession. Reaching the coast, this spectacular parade of weapon-bearing men took up a standing position facing the Bazaar. There, in a public demonstration of his grandeur, the Prince moved on further and asked Kunju Wissie Crauw, the son of the late *Karanavar*, to go before the fortress of the Hollanders and hand the two soldiers over to the Dutch authorities through *Karanavar* Koikuttiyali Crauw. Seven weeks after their escape, the soldiers were handed over to the Company. Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council concluded the report with a reflective analysis on the incident.

Although the prince was clearly three times stronger in manpower, armed with bows and arrows, he believed himself to be too weak to take a chance against the Moors. Probably he would also not have won.....*But it also showed [us] what power, influence, and respect [mean] here [in Cannanore] [italics added].*²

Quite obviously, the VOC officials in Cannanore did not completely fail to perceive the underlying structure and pattern of power relations in Kolathunadu. The detailed description given by the Malabar Commandement on such an apparently insignificant incident of the desertion and the return of two soldiers was obviously aimed at painting the VOC authorities in Batavia and Amsterdam a vivid picture of the functioning of power relations in Kolathunadu. From this perspective, namely that the Arackal Swarupam constituted an intrinsic part of the regional power structure, we may proceed to analyse and understand the dynamics of political relations in Kolathunadu between 1663 and 1723.

Drive towards centralization: Prince Ramathiri (1663–1673)

The displacement of the *Estado da India* by the VOC in 1663 did not result in any immediate impact on the regional socio-political life. The successful attempt of the Dutch to oust the Portuguese was not received with any particular enthusiasm by the regional powers—especially the Ali Rajas. The tepid support accorded to the VOC by the Ali Raja against the

² ‘...dog den prince schoon drie maal sterker van manschap med pyl, en boog ligt gewapend, zig te swak geloovde om een kans tegens de mooren te wagen, en waarseynelyk ook daar bij zoude te kort geschoten zyn..... maar die ook doet sien, van wat magt, vermogen en ontsag hier is.’ VOC 1474, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 31 Jan. 1691, fo. 507v.

Portuguese should be seen more in the light of a tactical move, as later perceived, to obtain control of the fortress.³ The decision of the Dutch to stay on greatly undermined the objective of the Ali Raja. On the other hand, apart from the formal treaty signed with the VOC, the Kolathiri raja to a large extent remained indifferent to the coastal affairs. It seems that the political atmosphere in the region was charged more by the increasing power of the Nayakas of Ikkeri than by the Dutch occupation of the Portuguese fortress. On the eve of the arrival of the Dutch in Cannanore the Ali Raja, as were the members of the political elite of the kingdom, was mostly concerned with this mounting pressure from the north.

The expansion of Ikkeri kingdom under Sivappa Nayaka (1645-1660) had particular significance in Malabar history. It decisively brought an end to the isolation of the northern regions of Malabar from external military intrusions. It is said that, pushing towards the Malabar frontier, Sivappa Nayaka had established strongholds which brought the Ikkeri Nayakas in close contact with the Kolathunadu politics.⁴ The growing menace along the northern frontier of Malabar had a decisive impact on the political relations in the region. The succession of Somasekhara Nayaka to the kingship immediately after the short regimes of Venkatappa Nayaka II (1660-1661) and Bhadrappa Nayaka (1662-1664) almost coincided with the establishment of the VOC settlement in Cannanore. The local elites in Kolathunadu looked to the VOC as a potential ally in their struggle against the Nayakas. The early interactions of the local elites with the Company were played out against this particular background.

Ramathiri and the Company: Early contact

The political economy of Kolathunadu, immediately after the establishment of the VOC in Cannanore, was invigorated by the centralizing drive of Prince Ramathiri, who was next to the Kolathiri in the line of seniority (*muppumura*) to the 'rajaship'. Even before his accession to the highest position in the power hierarchy of the Swarupam, the Prince actually held the power in his hands.⁵ His initial contacts with the VOC officials in Cannanore appear to have been very limited. Consequently, the local Company servants were taken somewhat aback by the unexpected visits of the heir apparent Prince Ramathiri, who had not turned up in the fortress for quite some time, with promises to protect the commercial interests of the Company in the region. He was happy to give assurances of control of the entire trade of the region in pepper, cardamom and opium, and actually promised to take action against the contraband trade conducted along both land and water routes. In the end the cat was out of

³ It was reported in 1663 that the Ali Raja proposed the VOC hand the fortress over to him were it to be abandoned by the Company. VOC 1239, Missive from Cannanore to *Heren XVII*, 19 Sept. 1663, fo.1646v.

⁴ K. D. Swaminathan, *The Nayakas of Ikkeri* (Madras: P. Varadachary & Co., 1957), 95.

⁵ It was Ramathiri who had signed the first treaty with the VOC on behalf of the Kolathiri. *Dagh-Register [1664]*, 322-4.

the bag and the real purpose of the visit was revealed—his chief aim was to secure VOC ships to serve in his offensive against the expanding power of the Ikkeri Nayakas.⁶

Although, the officials refused such assistance for ‘decent reasons’, the developments soon proved to be crucial to the commercial interests of the Company.⁷ The Dutch report explained that two powerful Mangalore families, assisted by the Kolathiris, were at war with the Ikkeri Nayaka. The rebellious group besieged the Mangalore Fort as the Nayaka intended to hand it over to the Portuguese.⁸ The close association between the Portuguese and the Nayaka was a serious concern for the Dutch in the region. It was reported that Barsaloor had already come under Portuguese possession and any possible take-over of Mangalore would make their commercial presence substantially stronger in the region. Precarious though the situation was, the VOC was not yet ready to interfere directly in developments as any move would antagonize the powerful Nayaka.⁹ Nevertheless, the Company did not wish to let Mangalore fall into the hands of the Portuguese. Therefore, rather than making an all full commitment, the Company decided to assist the rebellion indirectly by providing gunpowder in return for either money or pepper.

For the sake of trade: The Ali Raja's Mangalore mission and its failure

The active role of the Ali Raja in this regional political development did not escape the attention of the VOC officials in Cannanore. Commander Godske, who visited the Cannanore fort in 1666, was not able to meet either the Ali Raja or Prince Ramathiri as both were on the border endeavouring to settle the dispute with the Nayaka.¹⁰ An amicable settlement of the conflict would have been preferable to the Ali Raja as the tentacles of his commercial interests spread out along the nearby Canara Coast too. In this situation, an impending Portuguese take-over of the Mangalore Fort and the trade in its vicinity would not have been welcomed by the Ali Raja. The tactful move made by the Ali Raja when he set up a commercial establishment close to Mangalore, was most likely a precautionary measure against such a possible development. In a letter to Batavia, Rijkloff Van Goens reported the Ali Raja's attempt to settle in the vicinity of Mangalore with the permission of the Ikkeri Nayaka. He interpreted this to mean that the latter had been unable to maintain his previous authority after the establishment of the Company at Cannanore.¹¹ Although Van Goens described this as a positive development which would help the Dutch to deal directly with the ‘inlanders’, there is no reason to believe that the Ali Raja had any intention of abandoning

⁶ VOC 1242, Missive from Cannanore to Cochin, 11 Feb. 1664, fo. 1061r-v.

⁷ The report does not mention what those ‘decent reasons’ were.

⁸ VOC 1251, Report from Van Goens and the Council of Colombo to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1665, fo. 461.

⁹ Ibid. fo. 464.

¹⁰ VOC 1251, Missive from Van Goens and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 6 Mar. 1666, fo. 1723.

¹¹ VOC 1256, Missive from Van Goens to Batavia, 18 May 1666, fos. 68v-69r.

Cannanore. This seems an obvious conclusion from the fact that the same report stated that the *Karanavar* of the Arackal House continued to remain in charge of the commercial affairs of the Bazaar. This supports the assumption that, although the failure to secure Cannanore fort would have prompted a search for a stronghold away from the Dutch presence, the Ali Raja's decision to establish a trade settlement near Manglore was largely motivated by the growing Portuguese threat to his commercial ambitions in that region.

Interestingly, not all the Dutch officials shared the same opinion as Van Goens. Commander Godske, who was not in favour of Van Goens' Malabar policy, made it a point to expostulate against the feasibility of keeping the settlement. In his report to Amsterdam he argued that, the Ali Raja's decision could disrupt the commercial activities of the Company at Cannanore as the latter had the power to shift the entire trade of the port to a harbour of his own choice.¹² These two conflicting reflections on the same incident show that both Company officials sought to interpret this incident each in their own way in order to score over their rival faction instead of analysing the local political developments from the point of view of an outsider. The abrupt return of the Ali Raja to Cannanore brought an end to all guessing. It was reported to Cochin in May 1666 that the request of the Ali Raja to establish a factory near Mangalore had been refused by the Nayaka. This would have left the Ali Raja with no other option, but returning to Cannanore.¹³

Growing tension: Ramathiri and the VOC

The return of the Ali Raja and the failure to improve the VOC's performance in Cannanore forced the local Company servants to pin hopes on the previous promises of Prince Ramathiri that he wished to trade with them directly if the Ali Raja and his men were not prepared to comply with their commercial obligations.¹⁴ It turned out that Prince Ramathiri had larger goals in sight. The persistent competition between various European companies to acquire a slice of the spice supply from Malabar gave the local 'men of prowess' greater scope to appropriate a share in the regional trade profit. The VOC reported from Cannanore that both Prince Ramathiri and the Ali Raja were maintaining close commercial relations with the English and the French and were trying to take advantage of their commercial rivalry to extort more profit out of them.¹⁵ Similarly, in 1668 it was reported that Prince Ramathiri had tried to make a deal with the Portuguese captain of the ship *Ornyssende* (*Cruyssende*?) probably a privateer, to draft a joint plan to attack Canara.¹⁶

¹² VOC, 1255, Missive from Commander Isbrand Godske to *Heren XVII*, 10 Mar. 1667, fos. 999-1000.

¹³ VOC 1256, Missive from Commander Isbrand Godske and the Cochin Council to Ceylon, 18 June 1666, fo. 314r-v.

¹⁴ VOC 1268, Report from Colombo to Batavia, 13 June 1668, fo. 1123v.

¹⁵ VOC 1270, Missive from Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 16 Feb. 1670, fo. 938v.

¹⁶ VOC 1268, Report from Colombo to Batavia, 13 June 1668, fo. 1123v.

Whatever the authenticity of such conjectures may have been, future developments rightly point towards a deliberate attempt by the Prince to exploit the competitive commercial atmosphere to benefit his own political ambitions. The Dutch, who were angered by the active role of Ramathiri in the establishment of an English settlement in Kottakunnu [1670], pointed in their report to the increasing influence of the Prince in the political affairs of the region. They accused Ramathiri of preventing the Company men from approaching the Kolathiri to complain about the underhand machinations of the Prince to subvert the contract.¹⁷ The VOC was asked to hand over a written complaint directed to the Kolathiri through the Prince, who tried to play down the accusations by assuring the Company servants that he was straining every sinew to keep the contact between the Company and Kolathiri intact, thereby successfully keeping the Kolathiri at arm's length from such political affairs. The attempt of the Prince to usurp the authority of the raja was facilitated by the great age of the latter and he was exerting himself tremendously to win over the 'great men' of the region for the purpose.¹⁸ The greatest concern of the VOC was not the increasing power of the Prince but the evolution of political conditions in favour of the English and the French. From the Company's point of view, the weakening of the kingship could damage its 'legal' claim to the regional trade and ultimately cause it to be lost to its European competitors. The problem was not confined to the Company and the Kolaswarupam alone. It had wider ramifications in the local set-up.

Changing commercial atmosphere and shifting strategies: the Ali Raja and the Company

The changing local power relations and the growing maritime trade opportunities forced the Ali Raja to be on constant guard to devise strategies to sustain his dominant position in the political economy of Kolathunadu. The opening up of greater commercial opportunities offered by the growing competition for spices gradually ignited more conflicts among the Mappilas. We have some suggestions, although incomplete, to support such an assumption. In a report to the Republic, Van Goens explained the somewhat favourable attitude of the Ali Raja to the Company as the outcome of increasing problems within the Mappila ranks. The report averred that the scattered Mappila merchants along the coast, who had earlier operated under the control of the Ali Raja, were being encouraged to try their hand at being free entrepreneurs under the blessings of the English and the French.¹⁹ The losing grip on local merchants and supplies may have pushed the Ali Raja closer to the Company.

¹⁷ VOC 1273, Report from Cochin to Van Goens in Colombo, 15 June 1669, fos. 1397v-1398r.

¹⁸ VOC 1274, Missive from Cochin to Batavia, 14 Aug. 1670, fo.109v.

¹⁹ VOC 1270, Missive from Van Goens and the Council of Ceylon to *Heren XVII*, 9 January 1670, fos. 4v-5r.

Withstanding the demands of Prince Ramathiri, the Ali Raja refused to supply pepper to the English.²⁰

It is likely that the Ali Raja made an effort to exploit the already tensed relationship between the Company and the Prince to his own advantage. On his visits to the fort the Ali Raja tried to instigate a rift between the Prince and the Company and promised a joint action against him and the English. The Ali Raja pledged that he 'would not rest before he drives the Prince out of the government and the French and the English of the land'.²¹ With a certain degree of circumspection, the Dutch did not rely on such statements. They wondered whether the Ali Raja was showing off his reliability in front of the Company while surreptitiously carrying out his own agenda.

At this juncture, a thorough reorganization in the administrative structure of the VOC in Malabar occurred, which had been separated from Ceylon and had become an autonomous commandement under Hendrik Adriaan Van Reede, appointed as its chief in 1670. However, this administrative change did not fundamentally alter the vigorous mercantile-cum-political policy pursued by the VOC in Malabar under Van Goens up to that time. Van Reede, who had served under Van Goens during his Malabar expeditions and conquests between 1658 and 1663, principally adhered to the same policy of his old master until he retired from the office in 1677. The challenging rise of Prince Ramathiri with the assistance of the English and the French was the main political crisis with which he had to contend at the beginning of his career in Cannanore. At the same time, Van Reede was not ready to trust the Ali Raja who was identified as one of the main challenges to the monopoly claims of the VOC in Malabar.

Conflicting interests: Ramathiri versus the VOC

The increasing influence of Ramathiri in the regional politics became even more apparent by the harsh reply the Company received to its complaints against him before the Kolathiri. The Prince rejected outright the privilege claims of the Company over other European traders on the basis of its contract with the Kolathiri. He affirmed that the regional trade was open to all, including the English, the Danes,²² and the French. The Dutch, upon being told that they did not have any specific right, alleged that the Prince's decision to contravene the old treaty had been instigated by the influence of the English, who succeeded in striking an accord with the former by playing him with precious gifts.²³ Sagely, the Prince successfully played out

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ VOC 1274, Missive from Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 14 Aug. 1670, fo.111r.

²² However, the commercial presence of the Danes in and around Cannanore does not seem to have had any significance at all. They established a factory in South Kerala at Erruwa in 1695-6 and continued there till 1703.

²³ VOC 1274, Missive from Cochin to Batavia, 14 Aug. 1670, fo.109r.

the various European powers to extract more resources for his own political designs. The English and the French were completely at the mercy of the Prince as he offered them protection—of course at a cost—from the encroachment of other local ‘men of prowess’.²⁴

The close relations of the Prince with the English and the French were inextricably linked to the benefits he reaped from such an alliance. Unlike the Dutch, the contact with the English and the French directly benefited the fiscal and military requirements of the Prince.²⁵ For its part, by and large the VOC tried to pretend to be an independent political power and thereby it limited its accessibility to the local elites. The Dutch designation of Cannanore as a ‘conquered territory’ from the Portuguese deprived the local elites of receiving any tolls or taxes from the Company. This pushed them closer to the English and the French who gave in, albeit mostly under pressure, to the demands of the local powers. Prince Ramathiri quite openly proclaimed his support of the English on one occasion when he was approached by the Dutch to expel the English after the capture of the Dutch ship *Meyboom* by the latter. He pointed out that the VOC was neither ready to provide military assistance to the raja as per the treaty, nor allow him any tolls on merchandise. In contrast, besides toll on merchandise, the English and the French paid 1, 500 pagodas to the raja for permission to trade. The prince demanded that if the Company wished to expel the English and the French, it should be prepared to compensate the losses of the raja.²⁶ The response received by the Company from the *Karthavu* of Dharmapatanam regarding this matter also ran along the same line as that of Prince Ramathiri.²⁷ It was economic interests which ultimately determined the political behaviour of the local elites towards the European Companies.

The fall of Ramathiri

Naturally, the persistent efforts of the prince to enhance his authority began to destabilize the power equilibrium in the region. This gave rise to continuous conflict between the Prince and his opposition who resented the strengthening relationship between the Prince and the English and the French.²⁸ The report sent to Batavia from Cochin [1671] mentions the

²⁴ He assisted the French who had settled in ‘Tiryengaet’ (Tiruvangad) against the interventions of the local lord. The settlement was later strengthened under his blessing. VOC 1284, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 20 Apr. 1671, fo. 2086r-v. *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 290.

²⁵ It is notable that the English and the French supplied money and arms, often under pressure, to local princes to support their causes against their rivals. Unlike the Dutch, they also paid these princes tolls under contract. The English Factory Records sufficiently testifies this fact. *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 289-90, 314, 341.

²⁶ VOC 1295, Missive from Commander Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 22 Apr. 1673, fo. 271v.

²⁷ The *Karthavu* replied to the enquiry of the Company about his close commercial relations with the English and the French by saying that, if the Company were ready to pay as high a price for spices as the others and half in cash and the other half in merchandise, he would change his trade to the Company. Ibid. fo. 272r.

²⁸ VOC 1284, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 20 Apr. 1671, fo. 2086r.

ongoing conflict between the Prince and a faction of Nayers who were offended by Ramathiri because of a certain 'unjust verdict'.²⁹ Although the Prince was able to contain the uprising of around 2,000 Nayers with the help of his own limited number of Nayers, neither side was able to pull off a decisive victory over the rival group. The fact that the rebellious Nayers received the backing of the second prince—the third in the Kolaswarupam power hierarchy—complicated the situation. The involvement of the second prince, who was against the English—French alliance of Ramathiri, plunged the entire realm into complete disarray.³⁰ The involvement of the Ali Raja, against whom Ramathiri asked the assistance of the English, undoubtedly strengthened the ability of the opposition to take an upper hand over the Ramathiri.³¹ This necessitated the tough intervention of the aged Kolathiri and the local 'men of prowess' in this matter.

In 1673, it was reported that the raja had suspended Prince Ramathiri from his 'administrative duties' and had him replaced by another nephew of his.³² Besides, the Kolathiri constituted a *rijksraad* or 'state council' to assist in the task of governance.³³ However, these changes were delayed for various reasons. The offended prince Ramathiri strove to regain authority by resorting to armed strength, which led to further violence and casualties on both sides. Moreover, the ritual ceremony at the temple to install the new prince in Ramathiri's stead had to be postponed on account of the lack of money which was supposed to be distributed among the Nayers on such occasions.³⁴ While mayhem was continuing to dominate in the land, Prince Ramathiri met with sudden death. The demise of the Prince eased the process of change introduced by the Kolathiri. According to custom, the raja inherited all the property of the deceased.³⁵ The downfall of Prince Ramathiri, who was praised by the English as the 'most faithful and judicious person', obviously weakened the commercial presence of the English and the French in the region.³⁶ On the other hand, the death of the Prince and the change in the power relations strengthened the position of the VOC against its European counterparts.

Although this was the eventual outcome, the actual role played by the VOC in this political turmoil is not evident from the official reports. It was reported that, prior to the removal of the Prince and the outbreak of the crisis, various men of stature, including the

²⁹ The English from Baliapatanam also reported on the challenge faced by Ramathiri from a cousin of the raja with whom two-third of the Nayers sided. *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 303.

³⁰ VOC 1284, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 27 May 1671, fo. 2112r-v.

³¹ *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 321.

³² VOC 1291, General missive from Batavia to *Heren XVII*, 13 Nov. 1673, fo. 41v.

³³ This 'state council' in all probability might have constituted of various 'men of prowess' in the region. VOC 1291, Report from Cochin to *Heren XVII* in Middelburg, 23 Nov. 1673, fo. 588r.

³⁴ VOC 1295, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 22 Apr. 1673, fo. 270v.

³⁵ VOC 1291, Report from Cochin to *Heren XVII* in Middelburg, 23 Nov. 1673, fo. 589r.

³⁶ *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 320-321.

Prince himself, approached the officials to inquire about the position taken by the Company in the impending conflict. Considering the complexity of the situation, the Company preferred to remain neutral.³⁷ If this is true, the VOC remained a spectator throughout this whole political episode. The strategy of the Company probably was taken to avoid placing more economic and political burdens on its settlement. But, all these events did adversely affect the stature of the Company among the local elites. They complained that the English and the French always came to the market with cash in hand and would also not hesitate to supply the locals with sufficient money in advance. The VOC, on the other hand, did not do so and hence, violated the contract.³⁸ However, it would be erroneous to assume that Van Reede, who supported an active involvement in the political and commercial affairs of Malabar, remained completely detached from the political developments in Cannanore because that could have had an effect on the commercial fortunes of the Company. Perhaps through his report to the *Heren XVII*, Van Reede was insisting upon the need to adopt a more pro-active intervention in the Cannanore affairs. In all probability the Company might have silently supported the Kolathiri faction against Ramathiri. It is apparent that the Dutch were pleased at the outcome of the struggle, by which their European competitors were put at a disadvantage. Subsequently, the local VOC official Pieter Vertangen and Captain Renesse had a meeting with the Kolathiri, the new prince, and other 'great men' of the realm, in which they reaffirmed that the old contract would be kept intact.³⁹

Political restructuring in Kolaswarupam: the (re) invention of tradition

Meanwhile, the Kolathiri decided to take advantage of the situation to re-establish his authority in Kolaswarupam which had been appropriated by Ramathiri. Because he had been found 'not adequately competent' to govern, the prince, who was chosen in place of Ramathiri, was removed from his authority.⁴⁰ Installed, with the consent of the 'great men' of the region, two principal Nayar nobles (*vrijheren*) were appointed as the 'administrator' (*bestuurder*) and the 'deputy' (*vervanger*) under the superior authority of the Kolathiri.⁴¹ Van Reede commented that this system had been in use in the land for many years until it was abolished by the powerful Ramathiri.⁴² From this perspective, the new changes introduced in

³⁷ VOC 1291, Missive from Cochin to *Heren XVII* at Middelburgh in Zeeland, 23 Nov. 1673, fo. 588v.

³⁸ VOC 1291, Missive from Cochin to *Heren XVII* at Middelburgh in Zeeland, 23 Nov. 1673, fo. 588v.

³⁹ VOC 1295, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 22 Apr. 1673, fo. 270v.

⁴⁰ In 1673 the English reported that the Prince, although showing great sympathy for the English, did not possess enough power and his gentle character made him of no use as a protector. *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 325.

⁴¹ VOC 1308, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 15 May 1674, fo. 605r-v.

⁴² It is probable that Van Reede was referring to the *kurumazcha*—a political system in which more than one person shares authority in a *swarupam*. However, it is particularly notable that in the *kurumazcha* the authority was

the political set-up of Cannanore were interpreted as an attempt to re-instate the 'old tradition' of the Kolathiris. Consequently, it was considered an effort in the direction of strengthening the 'Kolathiriship', something the Company very much desired. However, it seems that, in reality the incident signified a sort of reaction against the strengthening of the 'rajaship' in Kolathunadu—a process which gained momentum, though later was aborted, under Ramathiri.⁴³

Although the Ali Raja remained apparently favourable to the cause of the Company, he did not miss the opportunity to take advantage of the collapse of the Ramathiri-English alliance.⁴⁴ According to the report, the Company was informed by a person whom the Dutch called the 'hoofd ragiador' about the unremitting plea of the Ali Raja to the Kolathiri to hand the English fort at Kottakunnu over to him.⁴⁵ On the other hand, the Company was informed by the Ali Raja about the English who had visited the new Kolathiri to obtain his consent to continue their free trade in Kottakunnu. The Ali Raja suggested that, if the VOC would be ready to pay the annuity which the English had been paying for the settlement to the Kolathiri, then the Company could easily rid itself of the English competition. He gave further assurances that after one or two years of imbursement, he could help the Company to discontinue this payment. He cautioned the VOC about the imminent success of the English who had already influenced the raja and other influential persons by the presentation of great gifts, and only had to pay an annual rent to be able to continue in Kottakunnu.⁴⁶ However, it turned out that the English refused to pay the huge amount of money (1,000 *Sao Tome*) demanded by the raja, a decision which temporarily sealed the fate of the English in Kolathunadu.⁴⁷

The favourable change in the political situation inspired the Company to move against the Ali Raja and his Mappilas. Van Reede alleged that the Mappilas were the main obstruction stopping other inland merchants trading directly with the Dutch fortress. The intention of the Company was to assure safe access for other inland traders, especially the Chettys, to the Company fortress with the help of the new regime. This was to be put into action with the help of the prince and other influential men at the cost of some good gifts. It

distributed within the *swarupam* according to the *muppumura*, not outside. In this sense, the development in Kolathunadu was different from the 'custom' of the land.

⁴³ It is interesting to note that these developments in Cannanore to an extent resemble the political process in Travancore in the eighteenth century, when the attempt of Marthanda Varma to strengthen the kingship was seriously challenged by the local nobles called 'Ettuveetil Pillamar'. For more details see, Lannoy, *Kulasekhar Perumals of Travancore*.

⁴⁴ VOC 1295, Missive from Commander Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 22 Apr. 1673, fo. 271r

⁴⁵ VOC 1299, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 15 Dec. 1674, fo. 410v.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. fo. 411r.

was thought that such people could counter any move of the Mappilas to spoil the ears of the raja against such an idea.⁴⁸

Unnithiri: the new contender for power

Meanwhile, the new changes in the power hierarchy in the Kolaswarupam complicated the situation, which had seemed virtually settled, all over again. The position of the late Prince Ramathiri was assumed by another of his nephews named Unnithiri, who was, according to the Dutch, not well received by the Nayars on account of his youth and tactlessness.⁴⁹ Soon after the succession of Prince Unnithiri to the high position of *ragiadoor-moor*, he began to instigate troubles. The VOC men reported that the Prince, with a few elephants and Nayars, ransacked the garden of a minor prince 'in such a way that he very much begun to follow the footsteps of his uncle [Ramathiri]'.⁵⁰ The actions of the Prince strained the relationship with the Kolathiri. The VOC report on a conversation between the Kolathiri and the Dutch Captain Renesse in December 1673 points in this direction.

This report states that the Kolathiri requested Captain Renesse to meet him at the temple near the Mappila Bazaar. Considering it as a chance to discuss with the Kolathiri the plan to obtain safe passage for the Chetty merchants to trade directly with the VOC without the hindrance of the Mappilas, the Captain accepted the invitation. During the meeting, the Kolathiri described the contemptuous behaviour Prince Unnithiri towards him and others, which was creating tension within the Swarupam. With an intention of resolving the dilemma, the raja was advised by his council to divide the authority into two—the northern lands under Unnithiri and the southern part under one of the nephews of the Kolathiri.⁵¹ This nephew of the Kolathiri, who was close to his uncle, promised the Company all assistance.⁵² The Company seized it as an opportunity to introduce to the nephew the plan to facilitate the access of Chetty traders, instead of Mappilas, to pursue their commerce directly with the fort officials. Captain Renesse promised the prince great dividends and benefit for the country if the plan were to succeed. The Prince was advised first to consult and win the support of various 'men of prowess' before the idea was put into action. The Company offered to support the prince up to the hilt in this matter.⁵³ The Ali Raja was prudent enough to counter the move of the Company by befriending the English. As reported by the English, the Ali Raja had a meeting with the English factor of Kottakunnu in which he promised to

⁴⁸ VOC 1308, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 15 May 1674, fo. 646r.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid. fo. 647r

⁵² Unfortunately the name of this prince is not mentioned in the document.

⁵³ VOC 1308, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 15 May 1674, fo. 647r-v.

pay off the balance of his account and to maintain a close friendship.⁵⁴ In the constant flux of ever-shifting power relations such assurances were, however, destined to falter.

Prince Unnithiri was obviously not happy about sharing his authority with the new contender for power. He stirred up new troubles by attacking other princes and devastating and plundering the gardens of the Mappilas, especially those of the Ali Raja.⁵⁵ In response, the Ali Raja started to arm his people against the Prince and a general proclamation was issued to summon people from all quarters to strengthen the defences.⁵⁶ Consequently, the question of authority within the Kolaswarupam yielded to the broader issue of the power struggle in the region. The conflict with the Ali Raja could not have been accidental. The prevailing influence of the Ali Raja in the local power politics greatly damaged any intentions Unnithiri might have had to appropriate the supreme authority in his hands. Unnithiri was apparently in the process of emerging as a new power centre in Kolathunadu. As in the case of Ramathiri, his attempt to protect and promote the English trade at Baliapatanam was aimed at extracting financial benefits from them.⁵⁷ However, the volatile political situation in the region forced the English to think twice about the precarious position of their settlement in Kottakunnu. The Dutch claimed that the impending threat of the Ali Raja's reprisal against Unnithiri and his allies and the growing demands from the Kolathiri forced the English to abandon their settlement for Calicut and to leave it to Unnithiri.⁵⁸

Competition for Kottakunnu: the Ali Raja and the VOC

When this news reached the Ali Raja, he sent his frigates towards Kottakunnu. But the Dutch, who were careful not to let the place fall into his hands, tried to spoil this move by instigating the Kolathiri and, if this should fail, by planning to help Prince Unnithiri against the Ali Raja. When eventually Unnithiri and the Dutch officials met, the prince offered the VOC the former English settlement and promised to work diligently to promote the Company's trade in the area.⁵⁹ The VOC intervention in this development indicates that, in spite of the absence of any open hostility, there was an inherent tension between the Company and the Ali Raja.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the Ali Raja's actions, as noted by the Dutch, were not greatly resented by the Kolathiri and other 'men of prowess' in the region. It

⁵⁴ *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 331.

⁵⁵ VOC 1308, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 15 May 1674, fo. 647v. *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 341.

⁵⁶ VOC 1308, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 15 May 1674, fo. 647v.

⁵⁷ The English records mentions that the English Factory at Baliapatanam paid customs to Unnithiri on trade. *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 341.

⁵⁸ VOC 1308, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 15 May 1674, fo. 648r.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 648r.

⁶⁰ The English reported that there were fourteen Dutch soldiers and a sergeant at Kottakunnu to protect the fort from the Ali Raja. *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 341.

is likely that the Ali Raja's attempt to occupy Kottakunnu was indirectly supported by the Kolathiri to check the increasing power of Unnithiri.

The VOC decision of occupying Kottakunnu to avoid the Ali Raja from doing so was not well taken by the Kolathiri. The Kolathiri tactically rejected the Company's request to take possession of Kottakunnu on the ground that the land of Kottakunnu originally belonged to a temple. By giving this land to the English, Ramathiri had defiled the temple and this had caused the Kolathiri and other 'great men' of the land to turn against him.⁶¹ In the place of Kottakunnu, the raja therefore offered to the Company a commercial settlement near Dharmapattanam—a place situated near the river route which provided a connection to Mysore.

Whatever may have been the rationale behind the argument of the Kolathiri, the Company did not fail to spot the commercial importance of both Kottakunnu, lying in the vicinity of the Baliapatanam River and the offered settlement near the Dharmapatanam River. As reported by local officials, mastery of both of these river routes would give the Company not only considerable control over the spice trade in the region, it would also offer it greater opportunities to trade directly with the merchants of Mysore. This crucial economic importance of Kottakunnu explains why the Ali Raja was so keen to occupy the site. In his report Van Reede suggested both making efforts to occupy Kottakunnu with the help of Unnithiri and at the same time accepting the Kolathiri's proposal about Dharmapatanam. He argued the establishment of the VOC control over these two vital river systems could easily curb the commercial strength of the Ali Raja, which would ultimately result in the complete control over the regional trade by the Company.⁶²

An anti-Ali Raja alliance in the making

The strategy of the VOC of instigating troubles between the Ali Raja and the princes gradually proved to be successful. In a letter to Batavia, Van Reede reported on an open fight between the Ali Raja and the Prince Regent, although the cause of the scuffle is not clear from the narration. He wrote that this was an appropriate opportunity to avenge all the troubles which had been perpetrated by the 'Mahommetaenen' against the Company from the beginning.⁶³ Pretending to be the champion of the cause of the princes, the Company did try to move directly against the Ali Raja and his Mappilas on various grounds. On March 1677 the cannonade of the Company against the Bazaar to obtain satisfaction for complaints levelled by the Kolathiri against the Ali Raja and to punish him for the violation of the

⁶¹ VOC 1308, Missive from Hendrik Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 15 May 1674 fo. 648v.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ VOC 1321, Missive from Commander Van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 23 June 1676, fo. 953v.

treaties with the Company was reported.⁶⁴ Although the clash was settled with the promise of some fines on the part of the Ali Raja, nothing materialized afterwards.⁶⁵

Meanwhile, the growing tension between Unnithiri and Ali Raja continued to disturb the regional political stability.⁶⁶ Angered by the high-handed behaviour of the Ali Raja, it was reported that, both Unnithiri and Kolathiri promised to hand over the tolls of the bazaars of Cannanore, Dharmapatnam, and Baliapatnam to the Company.⁶⁷ Although such an endowment of tolls to the Company was a pretty meaningless gesture as the Kolaswarupam had no control over the toll collection, the Kolathiri was obviously trying to demonstrate the legitimacy of his authority over these port-bazaars. The Kolathiri's attempt in this direction was unmistakably encouraged by the favourable attitude of Van Reede who had been striving to crush the power of the Ali Rajas in Cannanore. Although the interminable trouble affected the trade of the Company in Cannanore, Van Reede felt it necessary to restrain the Mappilas from making any headway in Cannanore.⁶⁸ The Malabar Commandement was optimistic as it had the support of the Kolathiri and the princes who were wooed by the prospect of sharing the trade profits with the Company.⁶⁹ Van Reede, following the example of Cochin, was obviously trying to strengthen the 'rajaship' in Kolathunadu; an institution which he thought could definitely strengthen the commercial control of the VOC in the region.

The crisis worsened when the English also entered the fray against the Ali Raja. The English desertion of Kottakunnu in favour of Calicut restricted their commercial relations with Ali Raja who pursued considerable commercial transactions with the English traders at Baliapatnam. In a letter directed to the VOC official Daniel Joncktys at Cannanore, the Director of the English East India Company in Surat requested help to retrieve a considerable sum which the English had advanced to the Ali Raja for the delivery of spices.⁷⁰ The VOC considered the emerging favourable political situation in Cannanore to be an opportunity to form an anti-Ali Raja alliance together with the English by supporting their persistent demand for recompense. It is particularly important to note that the above-

⁶⁴ VOC 1349, Memoir by *Koopman* Daniel Joncktus to *Onderkoopman* Jacob Schoors at Cannanore, 21 Sept. 1678, fo. 1493r.

⁶⁵ VOC 1329, Missive from Commander Van Reede from Cochin to Batavia, 17 Mar. 1677, fo. 1332r.

⁶⁶ The Dutch reported from Cannanore that the Ali Raja destroyed the houses of one *rugiadoor* of Unnithiri and other six people and killed a young Nayar on the Company's land. VOC 1329, Missive from Commander Hendrik van Reede and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 17 Mar. 1677, fo. 1332r.

⁶⁷ VOC 1329, Missive from Commander Van Reede from Cochin to Batavia, 17 Mar. 1677, fo. 1332r.

⁶⁸ VOC 1329, Missive from Commander Van Reede from Cochin to Batavia, 17 Mar. 1677, fo. 1332v.

⁶⁹ VOC 1343, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 18 Oct. 1679, fo. 434v.

⁷⁰ VOC 1343, Letter from Director William Volger from Surat to the Dutch Factor Daniel Joncktys in Cannanore, 6 October 1676, fos. 451v-452v. The debt was amounted to 17,847 *fanums*. *English Factories in India [1670-1677]*, 355.

mentioned problem was concerned mainly with some English officials' private deals with the Ali Raja.⁷¹ This hints at the increasing influence of the private trade interest in the English East India Company set-up in Malabar. However, the VOC was careful not to give the English any advantage, beyond the reimbursement of their debt. The Cannanore officials were given particular instructions not to give the Ali Raja any opportunity to pay his debt in spices—a privilege of the Company—, but in specie.⁷² The intention of the Company was to use the threat of an English attack to intimidate the Ali Raja and bring him under its control.

Such an anti-Ali Raja alliance was bound to fail as it was built up on contradicting interests. The Company essentially distrusted the Kolathiri princes, considering them 'false in their promises, capricious in nature, rapacious' and overall striving to seek their own advantage.⁷³ The Kolaswarupam was constituted of conflicting groups. The Kolathiri raja was 'merely a king in name', who refrained from meddling in governing.⁷⁴ As a result, the actual authority was vested in the hands of the *ragiadoor-moor*, Unnithiri. However, the people from Maday were not prepared to acknowledge him citing his improper behaviour.⁷⁵ Besides, an enduring English-Dutch alliance was altogether out of the question. The departure of Van Reede, who overtly or covertly took an anti-Ali Raja stand, from Malabar in 1677 obviously turned out to be in favour of the latter. This burgeoning situation ensured and strengthened the position of the Ali Raja in the regional power structure.

The Dutch ragiadoor-moor and the failure of the Cochin model

The death of the aged Kolathiri in 1680 and the succession of the second prince to his position deepened the crisis in Cannanore.⁷⁶ From this period the Dutch reports are focused mainly on the issue of the 'ragiadoor-moorship', which they regarded as the highest 'office' in the 'state'. However, as discussed in the second chapter, a state form 'administrated' by officialdom does not seem to fit the Kolathunadu polity. Moreover, from the VOC documents we are not in a position to infer any sort of active involvement of 'officials' in the mutual dealings between the local elites, including the Kolathiri, and the Company. It seems that the Dutch perception that the post of *ragiadoor-moor* was of a great importance was based

⁷¹ VOC 1343, Missive from Cochin to Cannanore, 14 Nov. 1679, fo. 452v. *English Factories in India [1678-1684]*, 373.

⁷² Ibid. fo. 452v.

⁷³ VOC 1349, Memoir by *Koopman* Daniel Joncktus to *Onderkoopman* Jacob Schoors at Cannanore, 21 Sept. 1678, fo. 1492v.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ This testifies to the fact that Maday, which was the original seat of the Kolaswarupam, remained a power centre in Kolathunadu during this period. Ibid. fos. 1492v-1493r.

⁷⁶ VOC 1361, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 Oct. 1680, fo. 560r.

on the fact that the race for the 'office' involved such dominant members of the elite in Kolathunadu as Prince Unnithiri and the Ali Raja. However, a close reading of the developments in Cannanore casts doubt on the attributed importance of the post of *ragiadoor-moor*. There is little doubt that the so-called struggle for the post of *ragiadoor-moor* has to be analysed in the context of the increasing competition for power in Kolathunadu—especially between the Ali Raja and Unnithiri.

The Ali Raja, now referred to as the 'head of the moors of Cannanore and Dharmapattam', was obviously growing powerful.⁷⁷ The Dutch noted that the Ali Raja was spending a great deal of money to enhance his influence on the successor to the old Kolathiri.⁷⁸ However, the report continued that he had not yet been able to acquire the desired position of *ragiadoor-moor* or the absolute title of 'Ali Raja' itself. Owing to their own private interests and the prevailing discord, the new Kolathiri and other 'great men' of the land were not able to take a decision on the matter. The Dutch officials were apparently pleased at this dilemma. They were afraid that a favourable decision would augment the arrogance of the Ali Raja who was already at loggerheads with the Company on various matters. The Company inferred that the delay in conferring the title on the Ali Raja might have had to do with an earlier promise of the Kolathiri to grant the toll of the Bazaar to the Company. The local Company officials had plans to acquire the right to collect the toll of both the Bazaar and Dharmapatanam from the raja at a civil price, which ultimately could help them rein in the Ali Raja and improve the VOC trade at Cannanore.⁷⁹

The toughening of the stance of the Company towards the Ali Raja was clearly revealed in the treaty signed with the latter in 1680.⁸⁰ While the earlier treaties allowed the Ali Raja to continue his trade to a limited extent, the new treaty put him completely at the mercy of the Company. Nevertheless, the enforcement of the treaty depended on the degree to which the Company could tighten its grip on him with the consent and help of the Kolathiri and other princes of the Swarupam. Although the Malabar Commandement was very much in favour of instigating trouble between Prince Unnithiri and the Ali Raja, such a plan had to be called off because of the lack of support from Batavia.⁸¹ Because of the intensive power struggle

⁷⁷ VOC 1355, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Council at Quilon to *Heren XVII*, 24 Dec. 1680, fo. 270v. According to an English report, the Ali Raja took over the position of *Karthavu* of Dharmapatanam in 1682. It could be possible that the Dutch were referring to the domineering influence of the Ali Raja in this small port bazaar. *English Factories in India [1678-1684]*, 394.

⁷⁸ VOC 1360, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 28 Apr. 1680, fo. 1752r.

⁷⁹ VOC 1355, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Council at Quilon to *Heren XVII*, 24 Dec. 1680, fo. 271r.

⁸⁰ *Corpus Diplomaticum Neerlandico-Indicum [1676-1691]*, III, 214-217.

⁸¹ VOC 1355, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Council at Quilon to *Heren XVII*, 24 Dec. 1680, fo. 271v.

going on within the Swarupam, the desire of the Company to turn the Kolathiri and other princes against the Ali Raja was more difficult to realize. It was necessary for the Kolathiri to maintain the support of the Ali Raja to face the challenge of Unnithiri. The Dutch reported that the attempt of Unnithiri to obtain the office of the *ragiadoor-moor* was seriously challenged by the Ali Raja who claimed that post for himself. The prince's ambition was seemingly being thwarted as the new Kolathiri was favourably disposed to the Ali Raja. In a letter to Batavia, Commander Marten Huijsman reported the request of the Kolathiri to help the Ali Raja in his battle with Unnithiri for the office of *ragiadoor-moor*. However Huijsman, who considered this as against the interests of the Company, tactfully refused any assistance in this regard.⁸²

In no way should this request from the Kolathiri to the Company be taken as just an example of his powerlessness to confer an administrative office upon his own choice, but more essentially it reveals that awarding honour or political status to a person was not an absolute prerogative of the Kolathiri. Instead, it was more of a matter of the power or *sakti* of the contender for the position. In this perspective, it was not the absolute importance which was attributed—here by the Dutch—to the position of *ragiadoor-moor* which counted. The importance of the position was proportional to the *sakti* of the bearer of the status of the *ragiadoor-moor*. To put it in another way, the whole episode of the competition for the *ragiadoor-moor* status as described by the Company can only be understood from the perspective of the manifestation of *sakti*. Success or failure in attaining this status would not have caused any particular advantage or disadvantage to the contenders as the position of *ragiadoor-moor* does not seem to have offered any 'administrative privilege' to the successful candidate. Far more importantly, success in attaining the status of *ragiadoor-moor* could have been regarded as a 'sign' by which the *sakti* of the successful candidate was communicated to the local society. In this context, the significance of *ragiadoor-moor* status can be perceived only in relation to the *sakti* of the bearer of the title.⁸³

The Dutch perception of the significance of the post of a '*rijkskanselier*', with which they associated the status of a *ragiadoor-moor* was, no doubt, was influenced by their idea of 'state' and 'administration' in Europe.⁸⁴ Their concept of the 'ragiadoor-moorship' was also coloured by their political experiences in Cochin where the influential 'Paliath Achanmar' held this post hereditarily and exercised considerable influence in the regional politics. The

⁸² VOC 1370, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman from Cochin to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1681, fo. 2262v.

⁸³ Later the conferring of the title of *ragiadoor-moor* on an unknown Pattar Brahmin points towards the fact that it was not such a coveted status as it was described by the Company. This indicates that the position of *ragiadoor-moor* cannot be regarded as an institutionalized 'administrative' post of crucial importance in the power politics of Kolathunadu. VOC 1448, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to the *Heren XVII*, 17 Jan. 1689, fo. 355v.

⁸⁴ VOC 1355, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Council to *Heren XVII*, 24 Dec. 1680, fo. 271r.

description given by Van Reede, who held the post between 1663 and 1665, of this office offers ample evidence that his political experience at home had shaped his understanding of *ragiadoor-moorship* in Cochin.

The daily events are mostly administered by a man who might be called first councillor, if he did not more-over exercise another rule. But since he has the function of a stadtholder rather than one resembling that of a councillor, the Portuguese called him “*regedore maior*” or supreme administrator. For this function the king generally uses distinguished people, but then those who have more experience and knowledge than the personal power of nayars, always looking to dignity of birth, because the Malabars attach particular importance to this. It is to him that the stewards and governors, sheriffs and tenants have to render account, while he attends to everything that concerns the king and the kingdom.⁸⁵

It was this Cochin *ragiadoor-moor* envisaged in the likeness of the European State bureaucratic models which the Dutch thought to be also present in the Cannanore political context. Moreover, Van Reede’s particular emphasis on the ‘dignity of birth’ as the main prerequisite to be appointed to the position of *ragiadoor-moor* may have been motivated by an urge to extol his own noble birth, of which he was very proud, before a Dutch audience.⁸⁶

There does not seem to be any evidence to assume that in Kolathunadu the so-called *ragiadoor-moor* status was a hereditary one and had any significant role in the regional political life, except when this title was assumed by some ‘men of prowess’. Here we may safely conclude that, even in comparison with Cochin, the push for the institutionalization of political power appears to have been very feeble in Kolathunadu. However, the Dutch officials did not seem to have made any distinction between the *ragiadoor-moor* in Kolathunadu and the *rijkskanselier* in Europe.⁸⁷ They obviously considered it to be a

⁸⁵ Quoted in J. Heniger, *Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein*, 18, 19. Also see, s’Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, 118.

⁸⁶ There is but little doubt that the appointment of Van Reede as the *ragiadoor-moor* of Cochin by the Cochin king in 1663 was above all motivated by the military strength of the Company upon which the new king, Vira Kerala Varma, very much depended rather than by his ‘noble birth’ about which the Malabar people were definitely unaware. J. Heniger pointed at the particular attention paid by Van Reede in highlighting his noble birth in all possible ways at a time when his family in the Dutch Republic was facing difficulties in maintaining its status in the noble order. Heniger, *Hendrik Adriaan van Reede tot Drakenstein*, 3-5, 97-8.

⁸⁷ However, as mentioned above, the notable exception was Van Reede who equates the Cochin *ragiadoor-moor* with the Dutch *stadtholder*—an honorary political post in seventeenth-century Holland. But, unlike a *stadtholder*, who was usually elected by the provincial councils of the Low Countries, the *ragiadoor-moor* post in Cochin was a hereditary one.

politically legitimized 'administrative post'. The political actions of Pieter van de Kouter in Cannanore should be seen in the light of this Dutch understanding of local polity.

As reported from Cochin, the failure of the Kolathiri and others to reach a general agreement regarding the position of *ragiadoor-moor*, interestingly led to an invitation to the Cannanore factor Pieter van de Kouter to take over the office.⁸⁸ Although the Dutch official report cited as the reason for this invitation the antipathy of the Kolathiri towards the Ali Raja's arrogance, it is hard to believe that there was a sudden change in the mind-set of the Kolathiri making him hostile to the Ali Raja.

We have no unambiguous evidence to suggest that private interests were involved when Pieter van de Kouter threw his weight behind the proposal of the Kolathiri citing a couple of strong reasons.⁸⁹ When the proposal was initially turned down by Cochin Council, the Kolathiri resolved to send two principal persons to Cochin with a written request to make a decision in favour of Pieter van de Kouter's appointment. To the great embarrassment of the Kolathiri, the Ali Raja and Unnithiri were later accused of abducting these envoys on their way to Cochin. Although they denied this accusation, Van de Kouter seized this as an opportunity to wreak vengeance on the Ali Raja by bombarding the Bazaar.⁹⁰

The Ali Raja's political setback in Dharmapatanam

Prior to this incident, the Ali Raja also had suffered some setbacks in his endeavours to control the Mappila port bazaar of Dharmapatanam. As mentioned earlier, the Ali Raja's control over the Mappilas was never been absolute or unconditional. Earlier, the Dutch had noticed that the Mappilas of Baliapatanam were bitter enemies of the Ali Raja who 'always engage in armed conflict, and if they find any occasion, they will cut each other down'.⁹¹ Conscious of this dysfunctional relationship, the Company even had designs to replace the Ali Raja and his men in Cannanore with those Mappilas of Baliapatanam.

⁸⁸ VOC 1388, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1683, fo. 1910v.

⁸⁹ The main aims proposed were: (1) to settle the problem between the Kolathiri and Unnithiri; (2) to prevent the Ali Raja from attaining the position of *ragiadoor-moor*; (3) to establish peace in the kingdom; (3) to help the Kolathiri to recover his all lawful taxes and incomes usurped by the Ali Raja and Unnithiri; (4) to prevent all trade being pursued in the country without the consent of the Kolathiri and the Company; (5) to allow merchants from Mysore to trade in Cannanore without any hindrance; (6) to prevent or, at least, to control the trade of the Mappilas with all foreign nations; (7) to control the shipping of the region; (8) to remove the French settlement from Tellichery; and above all (9) to assist the Company to obtain all authority to control the Mappilas. Ibid. fo. 1911r-v.

⁹⁰ Ibid. fo. 1912v-1913r. *English Factories in India [1678-1684]*, 394.

⁹¹ VOC 1360, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 28 Apr. 1680, fo. 1753r.

The intensifying centrifugal forces operating within 'Mappiladom' are apparent from an incident reported by both English and Dutch officials involving the *Karthavu* of Dharmapatanam. Although the Ali Raja had a profound influence on the Mappilas of the nearby Dharmapatanam, the proclaimed leader of the Mappilas of that port bazaar was one 'Karthavu'. After this man's mysterious death in 1682, the Ali Raja assumed the title of *Karthavu* and obtained the absolute right over the Dharmapatanam bazaar.⁹² However, a section of the local Mappilas under the leadership of the rightful successor of the deceased rose against the Ali Raja by claiming that the old *Karthavu* had been murdered by the latter.⁹³ It was reported that these Mappilas, assisted by the 'pirates of Badagara', attacked and succeeded in expelling the Ali Raja from office. But their victory over the Ali Raja seems to have been incomplete. Ensuing reports show that the Ali Raja was trying to fortify a cliff on an island nearby Dharmapatanam so as to control the undefended Bazaar with the help of his cannons and associates stationed there.⁹⁴ The newly installed *Karthavu* pleaded with the Company for help against the Ali Raja, promising possession of the cliff as well as his friendship. But, although they were well aware of the strategic importance of the island cliff for the control of the trade in the region, the Dutch did not consider the matter pressing and felt it better to leave the cliff under the control of the Ali Raja than anybody else for the moment.⁹⁵

Changing attitude of the VOC towards the Ali Raja

At this juncture, its fading optimism on the prospects of Mysore trade forced the Company to reassess its policy.⁹⁶ The growing concern about the marketing of the Company's imported goods in Cannanore and its hinterland forced the VOC to turn in favour of the Ali Raja, because he, unlike the other traders with little capital, was the only option with whom the Company could trade.⁹⁷ The Malabar Commandement under Marten Huijsman now accepted that the Ali Raja 'has penetrated the government so far he cannot easily be eliminated from it, except by his death'.⁹⁸ It was better for the Company to eschew the internal affairs of the Kolathiri, Unnithiri, and the Ali Raja, unless these seriously threaten the interests of the Company. The increasing presence of the English may also have influenced

⁹² The title *Karthavu* can be roughly translated as 'lord'.

⁹³ VOC 1388, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1683, fo. 1914v. *English Factoris in India [1678-1684]*, 394.

⁹⁴ VOC 1388, Ibid. fo. 1915r.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ See, Chapter Five.

⁹⁷ VOC 1410, Missive from Commander Gelmer Vosburg and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 29 May 1685, fo. 616r.

⁹⁸ Ibid. fo. 616r-v.

the Dutch stance towards the Ali Raja, whose friendship was necessary to stem the advance of their rivals in the spice trade.⁹⁹ This change in the Company's attitude was clearly brought out by the sacking of Pieter van de Kouter, who argued fervently for the Company's political intervention in Cannanore and was a great advocate of the Company's anti -Ali Raja strategy.

The report of Commander Gelmer Vosburg reveals hitherto unreported doings of *Onderkoopman* Van de Kouter against the Ali Raja. Most of his anti-Ali Raja rhetoric and actions seem to have been based on flawed arguments. It is interesting to note that both the Kolathiri and Prince Unnithamburan complained to Gelmer Vosburg about the 'unreasonable actions' of Van de Kouter against the Ali Raja.¹⁰⁰ This indicates that Van de Kouter's claim that he was fervently supported by the Kolathiri to take over the post of *ragiadoor-moor* was not entirely true. It is probable that many of his reproaches against the Ali Raja and his 'mooren' were aimed to justify his own actions in Cannanore. If the complaints levelled against him by the Ali Raja are to be believed, Van de Kouter more or less seems to have assumed the position of *ragiadoor-moor* or acted accordingly without the full knowledge of Cochin. The Ali Raja alleged that Van de Kouter, 'posing as the *ragiadoor-moor* of the king Kolathiri, had recruited a private 'inland army', and had bombarded the Bazaar. The Ali Raja had afterwards even been forced to pay for the expenses of this adventure.¹⁰¹

It is noteworthy that the letters of the Kolathiri, written in support of Van de Kouter's assumption of the office, failed to satisfy the Cochin Council.¹⁰² A re-reading of the complaint levelled against Van de Kouter by the Kolathiri implies that the story about the abduction of the envoys of the Kolathiri with letters to Cochin in support of Van de Kouter could have been fabricated.¹⁰³ Although we are completely uninformed about Van de Kouter's private trade interests, it is possible that he aimed to extract benefit from the office of *ragiadoor-moor*.¹⁰⁴ However, the changing circumstances forced the Company to review its

⁹⁹ VOC 1360, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 28 Apr. 1680, fo. 1752r.

¹⁰⁰ The raja's complaint included an account of the siege of the fortress by the local Nayars appalled by the atrocities of Van de Kouter, which was obviously not reported to Cochin. VOC 1425, Briefing of Commander Gelmer Vosburg to Cannanore, 16 Mar. 1686, fo. 128r-v.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. fo. 129r-v.

¹⁰² VOC 1388, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1683, fo. 1912r.

¹⁰³ It was reported that the two envoys sent by the Kolathiri with letters supporting the factor in his bid to take over the office of *ragiadoor-moor* were abducted by the Ali Raja and Unnithiri. Ibid. fos. 1912v-1913r.

¹⁰⁴ In a letter to the Commander Vosburg, the Ali Raja accused Van der Kouter of having forcefully invested in one of the ships of the Ali Raja to Cambay as bottomry, but without actually paying for it. VOC 1429, Letter from the Ali Raja to Commander Gelmer Vosburg, 28 Dec. 1685, fos. 1367v-1368r.

policy in Cannanore, which ultimately resulted in the dismissal of Pieter van de Kouter from the office of *Onderkoopman* in August 1686 and later his prosecution by the *Raad van Justitie*.¹⁰⁵

Unquestionably, there was a visible change in the attitude of the VOC towards the Ali Raja after 1680. This shift in the policy of the Company corresponds by and large to the change in the Malabar strategy of the *Heren XVII* and the Batavia Government. Rijkloff Van Goens' resignation as Governor-General in 1681 significantly influenced subsequent Dutch commercial policy in Malabar.¹⁰⁶ The aggressive militaristic commercial policy adopted by Van Goens was now discarded by the Batavia Government. Instead, the VOC preferred to maintain a more amicable relationship with the local political and commercial elites.¹⁰⁷ This change in the policy created a closer relationship with the Arackal Swarupam in the coming years.

Run to the coast: Prince Unnithiri

Although the VOC henceforth succeeded in running its business successfully in Cannanore with the help of the *Karanavar* of the Arackal Swarupam who had a better rapport with the Dutch, new troubles were in the offing.¹⁰⁸ The growing influence of Unnithiri in the regional political economy and the increasing presence of 'interlopers', especially the English, in the regional spice markets posed problems for the Company.¹⁰⁹ The growing collaboration between the Prince and the English traders, the Company complained, violated its contract with the Kolathiri. The Company's effort to restrain the Prince from participating in this 'illegal' trade with the help of the Kolathiri miscarried when Unnithiri openly defied the interference of the Dutch officials in his affairs saying that he had the right to do so as 'the lord of the country'.¹¹⁰ It was reported that he was even attempting to monopolize the regional trade in rice, arrack, copra, and salt by forbidding others to trade in those commodities. In a rather dramatic statement Pieter van de Kouter wrote:

¹⁰⁵ He was later discharged from all accusations. VOC 1474, Roll book of all the Company servants in Cochin, Quilon and Cannanore, 1687, fo. 480v.

¹⁰⁶ Van Goens, who assumed the position of the Governor-General of the VOC in 1678, gave up the post in 1681 and met with his death next year in Amsterdam.

¹⁰⁷ s'Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala*, pp. LXXIII-LXXIV.

¹⁰⁸ The *Karanavar* is described by the Dutch officials as 'a more discrete and friendlier and a much better merchant than the Adersia' (een veel discreten en rykelycker humeur en ongelyk beter coopman als Adersia). VOC 1388, Missive from Commander Marten Huijsman and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1683, fo. 1917v.

¹⁰⁹ VOC, 1406, Missive from the residents at Cannanore to the Commander and the Council in Cochin, 28 Feb. 1684, fos. 840v-842r.

¹¹⁰ The Prince directly retorted to the Company interpreter stating 'wat meent den capiteyn of ick sulx echter sal nalaten, ben ick geen heer van myn lant om dat te mogen doen.' Ibid. fo. 840v.

In sum, he looks rather a merchant than a prince, which his ancestors never did. [This] has brought about great damage to the poor and ordinary traders, and taking their bread from their mouth, as what remains for them is almost nothing but begging.¹¹¹

The Company was more concerned with Unnithiri's attempts to make himself master the cardamom trade which clashed with the interests of the Company. He confiscated the cardamom of those merchants who were not willing to trade with him, depriving the Company of the best sort of this spice. The rumour about the possible return of the English to Kolathunadu with the assistance of Unnithiri added to even more worries.¹¹² The Cannanore Council did not hesitate to suggest that Unnithiri should be expelled not only from his position *rugiadoor-moor*, but also that his power and authority should be reduced so that 'he, in no way, keeps some power which might enable him to invite some nations to privilege such settlements'.¹¹³ Once more the Company took advantage of the unremitting power struggle between the Kolaswarupam princes when Unnithamburan, the second prince in the line of succession, promised to bring down Unnithiri with the help of the Company and the Ali Raja, who too offered his services in this matter. The latter's participation in the scheme definitely had to do with his increasing competition with the Prince in the hinterland markets.

A miscarried attack: Mappila attack on the VOC fort in Cannanore

Notwithstanding the fact that there was a gradual change in the political atmosphere in Cannanore favouring the emergence of a more amicable relationship between the Company and the Ali Raja, the effects of this change do not seem to have reached the bottom level of the society. The continuing resentment of the common Mappilas to the Dutch was revealed in a sudden attack on the fort on 15 March 1687. When the *Karanavar* of the Bazaar was paying a visit to the VOC fort to resolve certain commercial problems with the Company, a group of ten to twelve armed Mappilas, probably his own entourage, launched an attack on the VOC soldiers at the gate. This resulted in the death of five soldiers, including four Dutchmen.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ 'In somma hij gelykt eerder een coopman dan een prins te syn, wiens voorsaten sulx nogh noyt gedaen hebben, werdende de arme en gemeene cooplyuden hierdoor al een groote afbreuck toegebracht en haer broot soo veel als uyt de mont genomen, want daer geschiet voor haer bijna niet meer overigh dan bedels.' Ibid. fos. 840v-841r.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid. fo. 841v.

¹¹⁴ VOC 1434, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 17 Dec. 1687, fos. 19r-20v, 103r-103v.

Although this incident does not appear to have been an outcome of a well thought-out plan, the attack and the subsequent developments point to the dwindling political and commercial influence of the Dutch in Cannanore.¹¹⁵ Under the changing circumstances, retribution against the Mappilas was out of the question. The Dutch were afraid that this would stir up the antagonism of the Mappilas against the weakly garrisoned fortress and could decisively affect the already dwindling commercial transactions in Cannanore.¹¹⁶ Above all, the Dutch were concerned that the English, who established themselves in Tellichery in 1682, could easily 'fish their advantage in this troubled water' with the support of Prince Unnithiri.¹¹⁷ The Company could not afford a complete alienation of the Mappilas and the possibility of the formation of a grand Mappila-Unnithiri-English alliance against the tenuously guarded VOC settlement in Cannanore.

The emergence of two conflicting factions as the contenders for the dominant power in Kolathunadu put the VOC in a dilemma. Unnithiri, with the apparent support of the English, was indubitably the greatest challenge to the ritual position of the Kolathiri in the regional power set-up. The Ali Raja attached himself principally to the Kolathiri, although his was never an absolute loyalty. Although at variance with the Ali Raja, the VOC could not find it tactically acceptable to exploit the conflict between the former and the Unnithiri, owing to the latter's alliance with the English.¹¹⁸ In 1687, the Company reported that the ongoing conflict between the princes in Kolathunadu had swollen to an extent the Kolathiri was no longer been able to hold out without any assistance from 'outside': he had requested assistance from the *Vazhunnavar* of Vadakara—a 'man of prowess' in the nearby territory of Vadakara.¹¹⁹ As there was no significant disparity in power among the various competing groups in Kolathunadu, a decisive victory over the rival group could only be achieved with significant support from 'outside'.

¹¹⁵ The attack took place while the *Karanavar* was within the fort. This makes it difficult to consider it as a pre-planned attack. Nevertheless the Dutch conjectured a conspiracy theory to explain the incident. According to this, the attack was masterminded by the Ali Raja so that the *Karanavar* would be killed by the Dutch and he would take possession of the latter's wealth. In the absence of any satisfactory evidence, this supposition seems to have been founded merely on the continuing hostility of the VOC towards the Ali Raja. Ibid. fos. 107r-108v.

¹¹⁶ VOC 1434, Letter from Commander Gelmer Vosburg and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 Apr. 1687, fo.104v.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. fo. 106r-v.

¹¹⁸ VOC 1434, Missive from Commander Gelmer Vosburg and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 12 Aug. 1687, fo. 153r.

¹¹⁹ VOC 1434, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 17 Dec. 1687, fo. 22r.

Threat from the sea: the Maratha 'pirates' and Cannanore politics

Meanwhile, a new maritime menace was brewing along the coast of Malabar in the form of the Maratha sea force. It was reported from Barsaloor that twenty-two sails of the 'Sambagia Ragias sea armada' were getting ready to pounce upon the Cannanore bazaar.¹²⁰ The regional elites, especially the Ali Raja, lost no time in assessing the gravity of the situation and called for assistance from the Company in repulsing any surprise attack. The VOC turned down the request and assumed that it was better to remain neutral. The Company was obviously not ready to antagonize the Marathas by co-operating with the locals, as this could affect its trade prospects along the west coast of India. Perhaps the local Dutch officials even saw this as an opportunity to curb the might of the Ali Raja and to revenge the death of the soldiers in the previous attack on the fortress, for which 'we neither have enough power nor consent [from Batavia] to do it by ourselves'.¹²¹ The Company's antipathy to the Ali Raja went to the extent of rejecting even the request of the Kolathiri to provide gunpowder and other assistance to foil the English attempt to build a stone fortress in Tellichery under the patronage of Unnithiri.¹²² However, events took an unexpected turn when the Marathas allied with the Ali Raja to fight against Unnithiri, although their commanders actually refused to render any assistance to the Kolathiri-Ali Raja combined force at the time of their engagement with the enemy.¹²³ The failure of this operation undoubtedly asserted the position of Unnithiri in the regional power configuration.

The growing tension 'within': the Ali Raja and the princes

While the Ali Raja's alliance with the Kolathiri remained unaffected, the growing influence of the princes, Kepoe Tamburan and Unnithamburan, generated some resentment in Kolathunadu. The Dutch described both princes, especially Kepoe, as bossy and ill-tempered men who were ready to interfere in the affairs of the Ali Raja.¹²⁴ However, owing to the constraints to move directly against the Ali Raja, the Dutch had to fall back entirely on these princes to control his influence in Cannanore. In March 1690 Captain Hendrik Reyms met both Unnithamburan and Kepoe and complained about the killing of the Company soldiers by the Mappilas and also about the money owed to the Company by the Ali Raja.¹²⁵ The Commander succeeded in extracting a promise of assistance from the princes in achieving satisfaction from the Mappilas. Even though the Ali Raja promised to deliver two of the

¹²⁰ Ibid. fo. 22r-v.

¹²¹ Ibid. fos. 22v-23v.

¹²² VOC 1454, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 25 July 1688, fo. 1240v.

¹²³ Ibid. fo. 1241r.

¹²⁴ VOC 1474, Missive from Isaack van Dielen to the *Commissaris* Van Mydrecht, 20 Mar. 1690, fo. 593r-v.

¹²⁵ VOC 1474, Missive from Isaack van Dielen to the *Commissaris* Van Mydrecht, 9 Apr. 1690, fo. 607r-v.

Mappila culprits accused of the murder through the hands of Prince Unnithamburan, the Company alleged that they were actually not who they were claimed to be, but slaves of the former.¹²⁶ The relationship between the princes and the Ali Raja were placed under even more pressure when Unnithamburan's mediation in the matter of discharging the debt proved ineffectual.¹²⁷ The Prince, agitated by the indifference of the Ali Raja, refused any further negotiations on behalf of the Mappilas. However, after some reconsideration, the Ali Raja agreed to settle up the arrears himself. Kepoe Tamburan, who learned of this, considered this as an insult to Unnithamburan and asked the Company not to deliver sea-passes directly to the Mappilas, but, to abide by the 'old custom', giving them either to the raja or to the princes.¹²⁸ In another instance, when the Nayar soldiers of Kepoe Tamburan were beaten off by Prince Unnithiri as they attempted to ransack some of the villages which belonged to the latter, Kepoe blamed the Ali Raja for this debacle.¹²⁹ It goes without saying that the Company did not wish to miss this opportunity to turn the tables against the Ali Raja. At the request of the VOC, the Prince consented no longer to allow the Bazaar vessels to trade in rice with Canara. Although the Prince promised armed vessels to assist the Company against the Ali Raja, the Dutch declined this offer, stating that the VOC had enough power to punish the Mappilas.¹³⁰

Notwithstanding these 'internal' schisms, exacerbated at times by the Dutch themselves, the overall power relations in Kolathunadu showed very little alteration during this period. A powerful anti-Kolathiri faction which was always at work was strengthened during the time of Unnithiri with the assistance of the English. On the other side, for the most part the Ali Raja threw in his lot with the Kolathiris.¹³¹ The European Companies, especially the English and the Dutch, were forced to be a part of these 'internal' power struggles for the sake of their commercial interests. The English had to opt for the anti-Kolathiri side, as the VOC claimed a rightful privilege to the regional trade by virtue of its contract with the Kolathiri.

Consequently, the initial designs and attempts of the VOC to remould the entire institutional and commercial system in Cannanore for its benefit aborted, checked by the resistance of the local Mappila traders under the Ali Rajas. Although it tried to expunge the

¹²⁶ Ibid. fo. 607r.

¹²⁷ According to the report of 9 Apr. 1690, two sea-passes which were sent from Cochin for the Ali Raja and the *Karanavar* were not delivered on account of the arrears they owed the Company. Unnithamburan promised that the Ali Raja and the *Karanavar* would bring the money owed the Company to him and he would deliver it to the Company in person. However, the Ali Raja did not respond to this idea favourably. The Prince took it as a personal insult and left for Baliapatanam. Ibid. fos. 607v-608r.

¹²⁸ However, whether such an 'old custom' existed in Cannanore seems to be doubtful as we have no evidence to prove this. Ibid. fo. 608v.

¹²⁹ Ibid. fos. 608v-609r.

¹³⁰ Ibid. fo. 608v.

¹³¹ VOC 1527, Missive from the Commander and the Council of Cochin to *Heren XVII*, 10 Jan. 1690, fo. 132v.

influence of the Arackal Swarupam from Cannanore on various occasions, ultimately the Company had to succumb to the reality of the situation, especially in the face of the challenging growth of the English in Tellichery. Soon more drastic changes were in the offing by the beginning of the last decade of the seventeenth century in Kolathunadu when upheaval restructured the existing power relations in the region.

Changing balance of power in Kolathunadu

The demise of the aged Ali Raja on 24 January 1691 ushered in rapid changes in the political economy of Kolathunadu.¹³² He was succeeded in his position of the Ali Raja by Kunjamu Crauw, the Karanavar of the Arackal Swarupam. Because the VOC had maintained a very strained relationship with the late Ali Raja throughout his lifetime, anticipations were high about his successor, who had a better record of relationship with the Company. On 3 November 1692, the Kolathiri, who was around eighty years old, also passed away.¹³³ This intensified the contest for power between the two dominant lineages of the Kolaswarupam, namely the Udayamangalam Kovilakam and the Palli Kovilakam. The new Kolathiri, who belonged to the Palli Kovilakam, faced stiff opposition from the Princes of Udayamangalam, who were opposed to the solemnization of his position. It is significant that Unnithamburan and Kepoe belonged to the Udayamangalam Kovilakam. In contrast, Prince Unnithiri was the nephew of the new Kolathiri and, of course, a member of the same *tavazhi*. The imminent change in regime obviously threatened the influence of the Udayamangalam princes, as it was apparent that Unnithiri would be the chief beneficiary of this new development. The rivalry went to the extent of denying the Udayamangalam princes permission to visit and perform the ceremonies required in the Baliapatanam Fort after the death of the Kolathiri.¹³⁴ The 'wise men' of the land cautioned that the body of the deceased Kolathiri would not be cremated before such ceremonial obligations had been properly satisfied, as they had never heard of or seen any other exemptions.

The Dutch believed that the root cause of the trouble was the jealousy felt by the Udayamangalam princes towards Unnithiri. The princes feared that the imminent take-over of the position of the Kolathiri by a new person close to Unnithiri would end their privileged status as *ragiadoor-moors* under the old regime. They were convinced that Unnithiri would strip them of the position of *ragiadoor-moor*.¹³⁵ The political circumstances in Cannanore were

¹³² VOC 1519, Missive by Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 10 Oct. 1692, fo. 640v.

¹³³ VOC 1527, Missive from Commander Isaack van Dielen and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 22 Feb. 1693, fo. 50r.

¹³⁴ Ibid. fos. 50v-51r.

¹³⁵ Ibid. fo. 50v.

certainly shifting in favour of Unnithiri. In this political turmoil, the Kolathiri-elect requested the assistance of the Company in completing all the requisite rituals, but the Company declined its help on the pretext it did not desire to become involved in internal political affairs. The Company simply expected that the victory of the lawful successor of the strongest faction would secure its commercial aims.¹³⁶ It had to pay for this lack of foresight. This aloofness seriously injured the economic interest of the VOC in the long run.

The empowerment of Unnithiri after the accession of the new Kolathiri reinforced the English commercial power in Kolathunadu. Under the active patronage of the new Kolathiri and Unnithiri, the English easily accomplished their goal of raising their Tellichery settlement into a fortified trade centre, thereby posing a serious commercial and military challenge to the VOC settlement in Cannanore. Although the Dutch strongly protested that this ran counter to the contract with the Company, Unnithiri remained obdurate. He blamed the Dutch for the debacle, as he had earlier requested them to establish a settlement in Tellichery, which they had failed to do.¹³⁷ Although the *Opperhoofd* Adam van der Duyn argued the cause earnestly before the Kolathiri, reiterating the clauses of the treaty by which all other 'foreign nationals' were not allowed to establish themselves in the domain, all such attempts ended in failure.¹³⁸ The VOC had to bear haplessly with the English commercial presence in Tellichery as a consequence of the changing power relations in Kolathunadu.

As alluded to earlier, the old factional rivalry in which the Arackal Swarupam was very much involved deepened when troubles began to surface between the Udayamangalam princes and Unnithiri. Apparently, the Ali Rajas who had been in close rapport with the Udayamangalam princes, especially Kepoe, remained loyal to the same even after the change of regime.¹³⁹ This relationship was quite the reverse of the situation which the Company sought to develop in its favour in Cannanore. Rendering any help to Kepoe against the burgeoning Unnithiri-English faction would automatically strengthen the cause of the Ali Raja. On the other hand, it would be unmistakably irrational to support the Kolathiri, as he was practically under the control of the Unnithiri. The end result was that the VOC was politically neutralized to a great extent in Cannanore.

The death of the Kolathiri and the increasing political confusion in Kolathunadu

The struggle for power in Cannanore intensified with the death of the Kolathiri by the beginning of 1696. The lawful succession of a new Kolathiri from the same Palli Kovilakam

¹³⁶ Ibid. fo. 51r.

¹³⁷ VOC 1559, Missive from the *Provisieel Gezaghebber* Alexander Wigmans and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 25 Aug. 1694, fo. 317r-v.

¹³⁸ Ibid. fo. 318r.

¹³⁹ VOC 1582, Missive from Commander Adriaan Van Ommen and the Cochin Council to Batavia, 30 June 1696, fos. 19-20.

was not easily conceded by Kepoe Tamburan. It led to a face-to-face struggle for power between Unnithiri and Kepoe. Prince Unnithiri assumed control not only of Baliapatanam but also of Maday, where the titular deity of the *Swarupam* was located and consequently the ritual ceremonies to inaugurate a new Kolathiri were traditionally performed.¹⁴⁰ Approached for assistance, the Dutch tried to keep aloof from this factional conflict.¹⁴¹ They were more concerned with the dwindling trade in Cannanore in the wake of the internal disturbances created by the power struggle between the princes. Although the Company expected to improve its commercial performance after this period of chaos and uncertainty when the new Kolathiri assumed office in 1697, the course of developments in Cannanore was heading towards a new direction by the closing years of the seventeenth century.¹⁴² The transition of power from Palli Kovilakam to Udayamangalam Kovilakam in 1698 marked a change in the political relations in Cannanore which eventually led to a new round of realignments in the existing power relations.

Conclusion

The detailed analysis of the power struggle among the various elite groups of Kolathunadu indicates the dynamics of social relations in the region. The interaction of the Arackal Ali Rajas with other local elites, especially the Kolaswarupam princes and European companies, fluctuated continuously throughout this period. In spite of this, the Ali Rajas remained more or less close to the Kolathiri faction. On the other hand, there was a perceptible change in the VOC policy towards the Ali Rajas by 1682. The Dutch, who were overtly and covertly striving to reduce the political and commercial influence of the Ali Rajas and the Mappila traders of Cannanore from the beginning, began to adopt a more favourable attitude towards the latter. The increasing commercial influence of the English in the region after the establishment of the Tellichery Factory in 1682 was a crucial factor which influenced this changing approach. Moreover, the declining influence of Van Goens in the Company affairs and the changes in administrative structure in Batavia by the end of the 1670s had a decisive impact on the Dutch policy towards the Ali Rajas in Cannanore.

¹⁴⁰ Madayi Kavil Bhagavati is the titular deity of the Swarupam. VOC 1582, Missive from the Commander and the Cochin Council to *Heren XVII*, 31 Jan. 1696, fo. 264.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² VOC 1593, Missive from *Commissaris* Hendrik Swardekroon, and the second of the *Commissaris* Jan Grootenhuis to Batavia, 10 Dec. 1697, fo. 8r.