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Peasant in transition : agrarian society in Western Sri Lanka under Dutch rule, 1740-1800

Dewasiri, N.R.

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PEASANT IN TRANSITION
Agrarian Society in Western Sri Lanka under Dutch Rule,
1740-1800

Proefschrift
ter verkrijging van
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volgens besluit van het College voor Promoties
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door
Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri
geboren te Gampaha, Sri Lanka,
in 1965

Promotiecommissie

Promotor: prof. dr. J.L. Blussé van Oud-Alblas
Co-promotor: dr. L.J. Wagenaar
Referent: prof. dr. Nira K. Wickramasinghe

Overige leden: prof. dr. H.W. van den Doel
prof. dr. F.S. Gaastra
dr. J. van Goor
dr. J.T. Lindblad
dr. G. J. Knaap

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Dedicated to my Mother and Father

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Finally my heart felt apologies to Dinusha, my younger sister, always waiting for my return from abroad, although fate has not given her the privilege of understanding what I have been doing the way others do.

Abbreviations

JRASS	- Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka
PLH	- Principal Land Holder
Rd.	- Rixdollar
SLNA	- Sri Lanka National Archives, Colombo
VOC	- Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (United Dutch East India Company); when indicated with sources, read 'Archives of the VOC in the Nationaal Archief in The Hague
UPHS	- University of Peradeniya History of Sri Lanka

A note on the references to *tombos*

When referring to *tombos*, reference to the specific file is not given. Instead, the PLH number, village, *pattuwa* and *kōrale* in which the village is located are given, as in the following example: PLH 1 of Mapitigama (Hina/ Gangabda). In the case of frequently mentioned villages, however, this rule is not repeated. In the section on primary sources in the bibliography, *tombos* have been classified according to *kōrale* and *pattus*, which makes it easier to trace the relevant file. A list of villages according to the order found in the *tombos* is also given as an appendix, which makes it easier to locate each village.

A note on the tables

* Most of the tables are included in the main text. For technical reasons, some tables had to be attached separately as Appendix III.

* There is no Table 3-11, therefore Table 3-12 after Table 3-10.

Glossary

<i>āchāri</i>	Caste of smiths, also known as <i>navandanno</i>
<i>ambalamal ambalam</i>	Small rest house located by the road, built for the convenience of long-distance travellers.
<i>amunuml amuna</i>	A measuring unit. In the case of paddy and other grains it is based on sowing capacity. It varied according to the region. Forty <i>kuruni</i> (q.v.) = one <i>amuna</i> . It approximated to two acres of paddy lands. As for areca-nuts, it ranged from 24,000 to 26,000 nuts.
<i>ande</i>	A system of land tenure based on providing, usually, half of the produce to the landlord.
<i>appuhāmy</i>	A minor headman, it is mostly used as a honorific suffix to the name of high caste persons.
<i>āracchi</i>	A village level chief, generally below <i>korāla</i> (q.v.)
<i>badahāla</i>	Caste of potters
<i>badda</i>	Institution in which a group of people was organized, mostly on the basis of caste, for performing a particular <i>rājakāriya</i> (q.v.).
<i>berava</i>	Caste of tom-tom beaters. They also performed a range of other tasks such as astrology and sorcery.
<i>bhupati</i>	Literally, 'the lord of the land'; pre-colonial kings used this title.
<i>binna</i>	Uxorilocal marriage
<i>bōdhisatwa</i>	Embryo-Buddha
<i>durāva</i>	A caste, generally denoting toddy-tappers from coconut palm.
<i>disāvany</i>	A province administered by the <i>disāva</i> . The Portuguese and the Dutch retained this pre-colonial system of administration.
<i>dispense dorṇ</i>	(Dutch) Maintenance village of a high Company official, similar to pre-colonial <i>gabadaḡam</i> (q.v.)
<i>dorṇ</i>	(Dutch) Village
<i>gama/ [pl.] gam</i>	Village/ villages
<i>gangoda</i>	A colloquial term for a settlement area of a village
<i>geld kanneel</i>	Peeled cinnamon for which a small payment was made to the peeler
<i>gewattal [pl.] gewatu</i>	Household garden
<i>goyigama</i>	Highest caste in the traditional caste hierarchy, also the numerically largest caste
<i>hakuru</i>	An agricultural caste; the name literally means 'those who make juggary
<i>hēnal [pl.] hēn</i>	Forest under slash-and-burn cultivation, usually referred to as <i>chena</i>
<i>kankānam</i>	Overseer
<i>karāva</i>	A caste generally denoting fishermen
<i>karemarukārayā</i>	Probably carriers of heavy loads
<i>kāriyakaravanno</i>	Literally, those who organize <i>rājakāriya</i> (q.v.). Europeans usually referred to them as <i>mayorāls</i> (q.v.).
<i>kōrāla</i>	Chief of the <i>kōrale</i> (q.v.)
<i>kōrale</i>	Unit of administration, a part of a <i>disāvany</i> (q.v.)
<i>kumbural [pl.] kumburu</i>	Paddy-field
<i>kurakkan</i>	A variety of dry grain
<i>kuruni</i>	See <i>amuna</i>
<i>lascarines</i>	Mostly denoting indigenous soldiers, but they performed a wider range of duties, such as messengers and guards.
<i>liyadda</i>	A block of paddy field
<i>mahabadda</i>	Cinnamon department
<i>maintementos</i>	Payment made in the form of money or provisions to the performers of <i>rājakāriya</i> (q.v.).
<i>mayorāls</i>	See <i>kāriyakaravanno</i>
<i>mudaliyār</i>	Highest rank of indigenous chiefdom under the Dutch

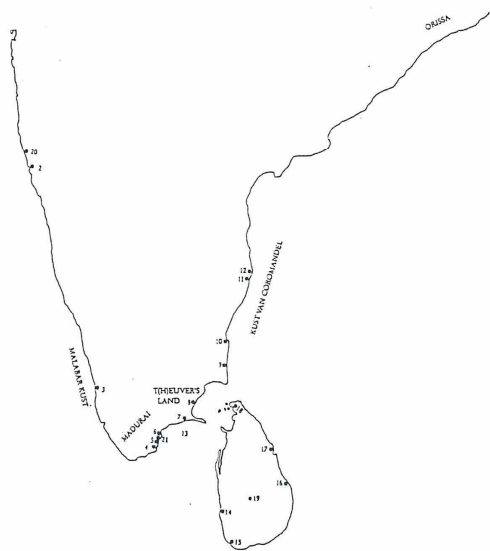
<i>mubandiram</i>	High-ranking indigenous chief below the rank of <i>mudaliyār</i> (q.v.)
<i>muttettuwa</i>	Piece of land in a village granted under the pre-colonial system which the village grantee cultivated with the un-paid labour of the other cultivators of the village granted.
<i>nainde</i>	<i>Rājakāriya</i> (q.v.) labour of <i>naindes</i> were mostly for work in plantations.
<i>ninda</i>	Literally, inherited property. In tombois, this term is used for lands which were exempted from taxes.
<i>otu</i>	A tax which was usually a tenth of the produce.
<i>ōwiti</i>	Meadow lands. Literally a dry land located by an <i>oya</i> (q.v.).
<i>oya</i>	River: in Sri Lanka some rivers are called <i>oya</i> while others are called <i>ganga</i> .
<i>padu</i>	A caste with low ritual status. The people were usually used for menial service, mostly as coolies.
<i>pangu</i>	A share of an estate (or a village under the pre-colonial system)
<i>paravar</i>	A coastal community made up of South-Indian migrants
<i>paravēni</i>	Literally, inherited (lands)
<i>porowādakārayā</i>	Wood-cutters
<i>pravēni</i>	Another form of the term <i>paravēni</i> (q.v.)
<i>puran</i>	Fallow lands
<i>rājakāriya</i>	Literally, the duty to the king. But in this study it refers to the unpaid labour of the peasant recruited by the rulers.
<i>rodiyā</i>	A community whose members are traditionally treated as outcasts
<i>'s Compagnies grond</i>	Piece of land that was declared as belonging to the Company
<i>uliyam</i>	Unpaid public work which 'foreigners' were obliged to perform. Here foreigners were mainly Muslims.
<i>watta</i>	Garden or plantation
<i>welyāya</i>	Stretch of paddy-fields
<i>wibadde vidāne -</i>	A village level headman, responsible for collecting paddy revenue from the cultivator on behalf of the Company

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* **A note on the maps:** The two maps of Hina *korale* and Alutkuru *kōralē*, made by the VOC administration of Sri Lanka in 1794, are cited a number of times in the text. They have not been included because of their large size. They can be found in the Nationaal Archief in The Hague (No. VELH-332 and VELH-334 respectively). For more details on these two maps, see K. D. Paranavitana and R. K. de Silva, *Maps and Plans of Dutch Ceylon* (Colombo: Central Cultural Fund, 2002), 91-2.

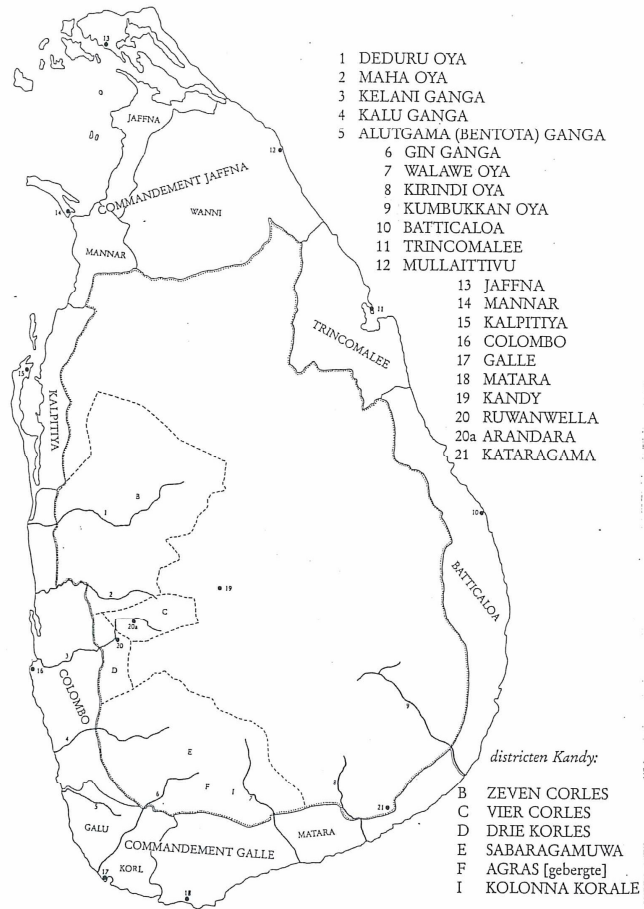
Map No. 1: Sri Lanka and South India



- 1 BOMBAY
- 2 GOA
- 3 COCHIN
- 4 MANAPPADU
- 5 CAILPATNAM
- 6 TUTICORIN
- 7 KILAKARAI
- 8 TONDY
- 9 NAGAPPATTINAM
- 10 PORTONOVO
- 11 MADRAS
- 12 PULICAT
- 13 INCHIADO
- 14 COLOMBO
- 15 GALLE
- 16 BATTICALOA
- 17 TRINCOMALEE
- 18 JAFFNA
- 19 KANDY
- 20 VENGURLA
- 21 PONNECAYL

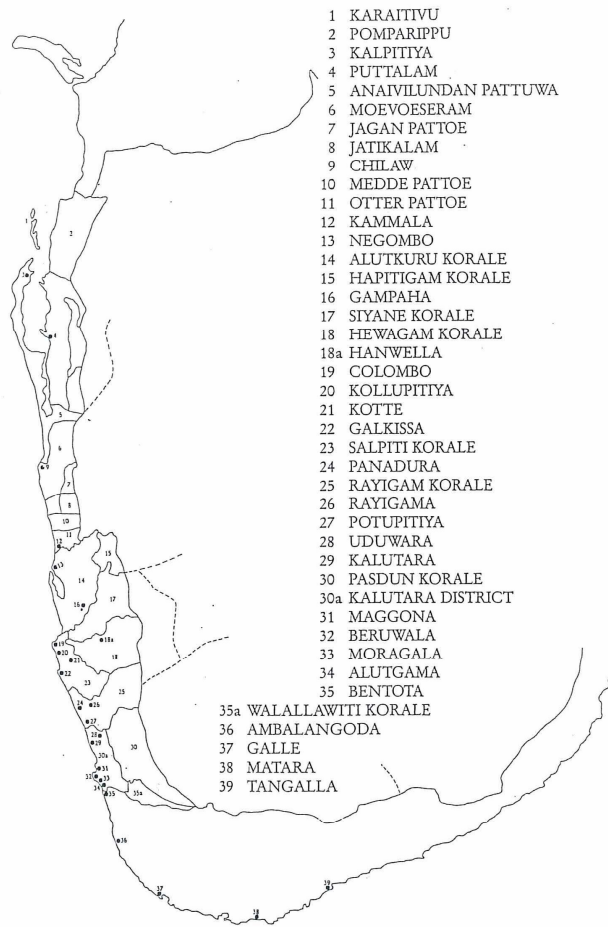
Source: L. Hovy, *Ceylon's Plakkaatboek*, Deel I, [Hilversum: Verloren, 191], cxliii

Map No. 2: VOC possessions in Sri Lanka



Source: Hovy, *Ceylonæ Plakkatboek*, cxliv

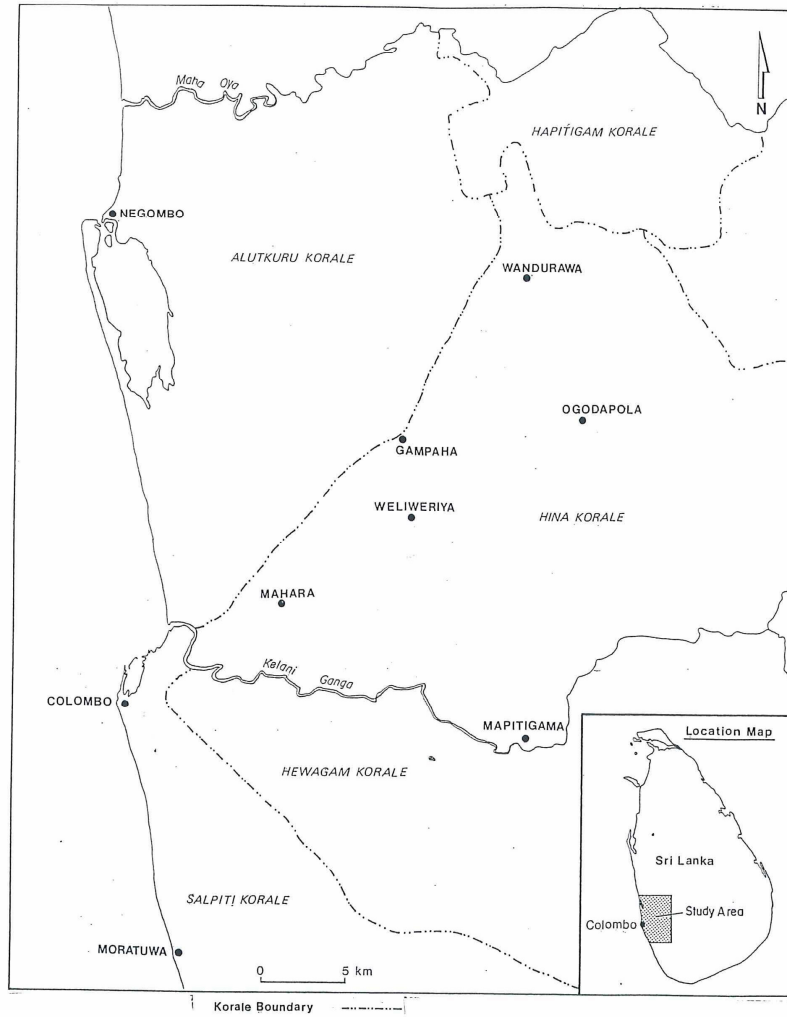
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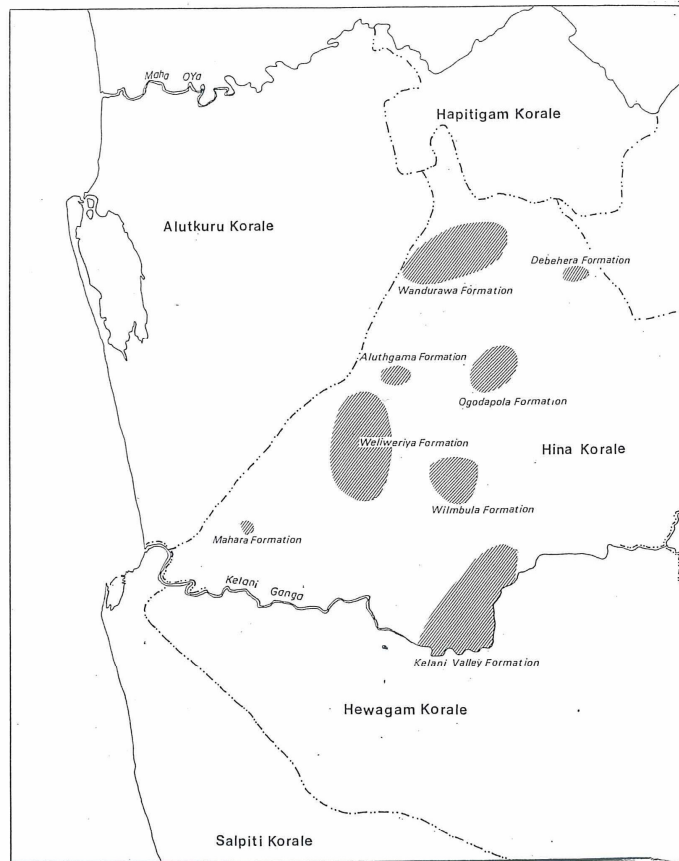
Source: Hovy, *Ceylon's Plakkatboek*, cxlv

Map No. 4: Location map of the central area of the study

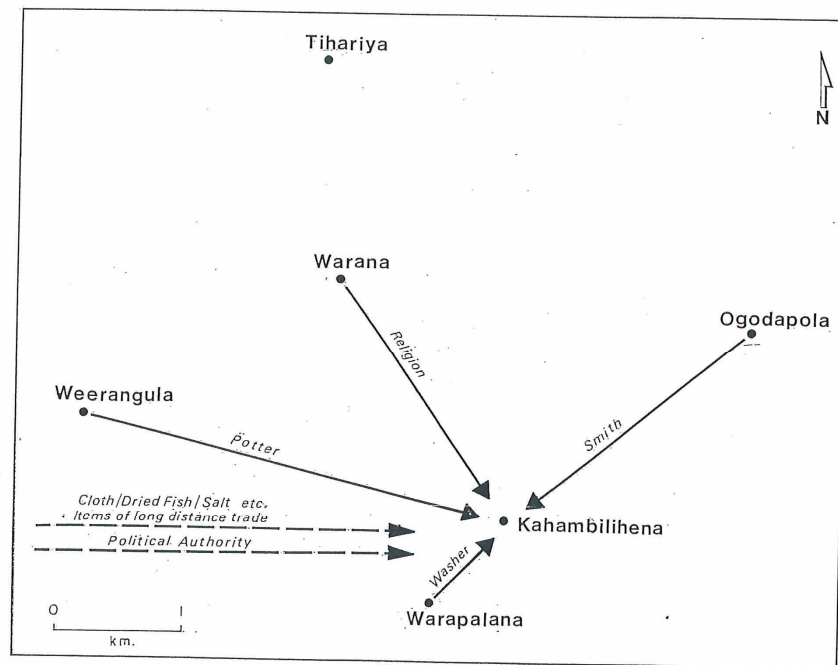
Hina, Alutkuru, Hewagam, Salpity and Hapitigam *kōrale* of Colombo *disāvany*



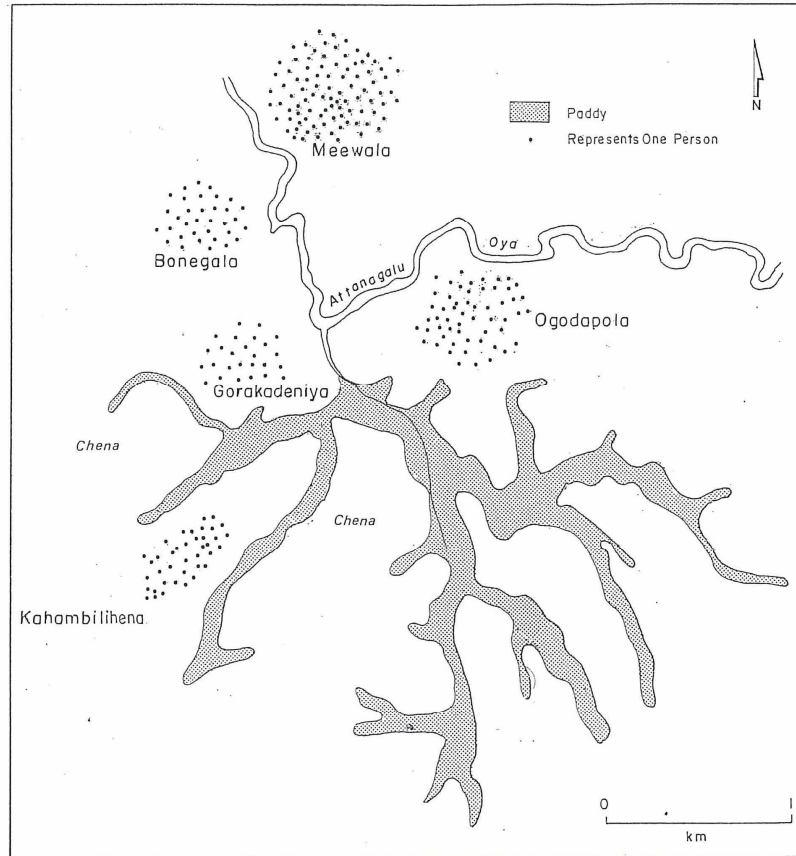
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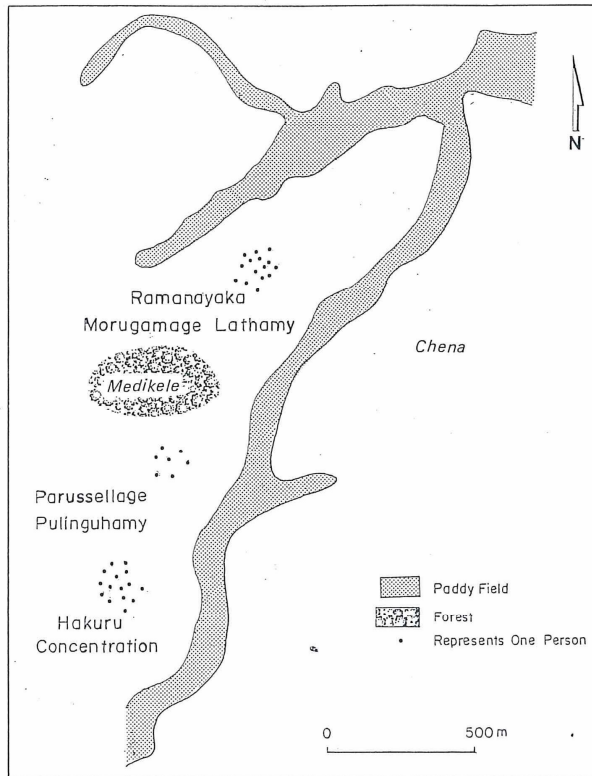
Map No. 6: Peasants' link to the outside world
Based on Kahambilihena (Hina/Mäda)



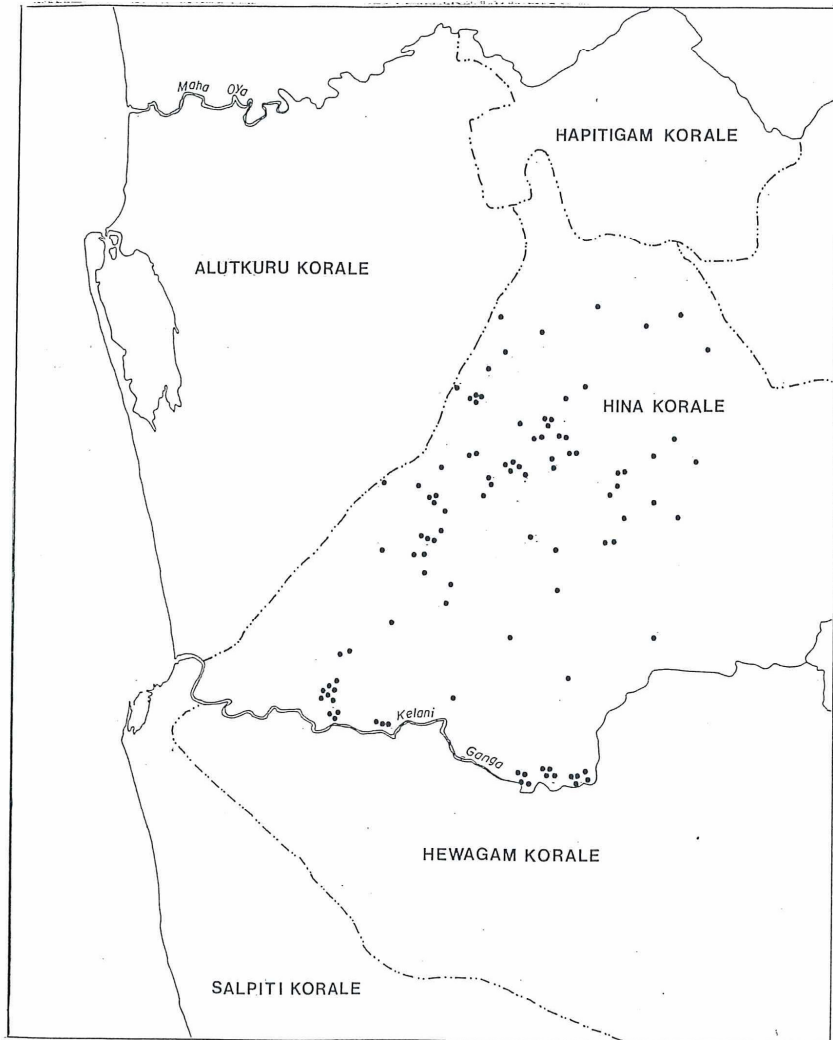
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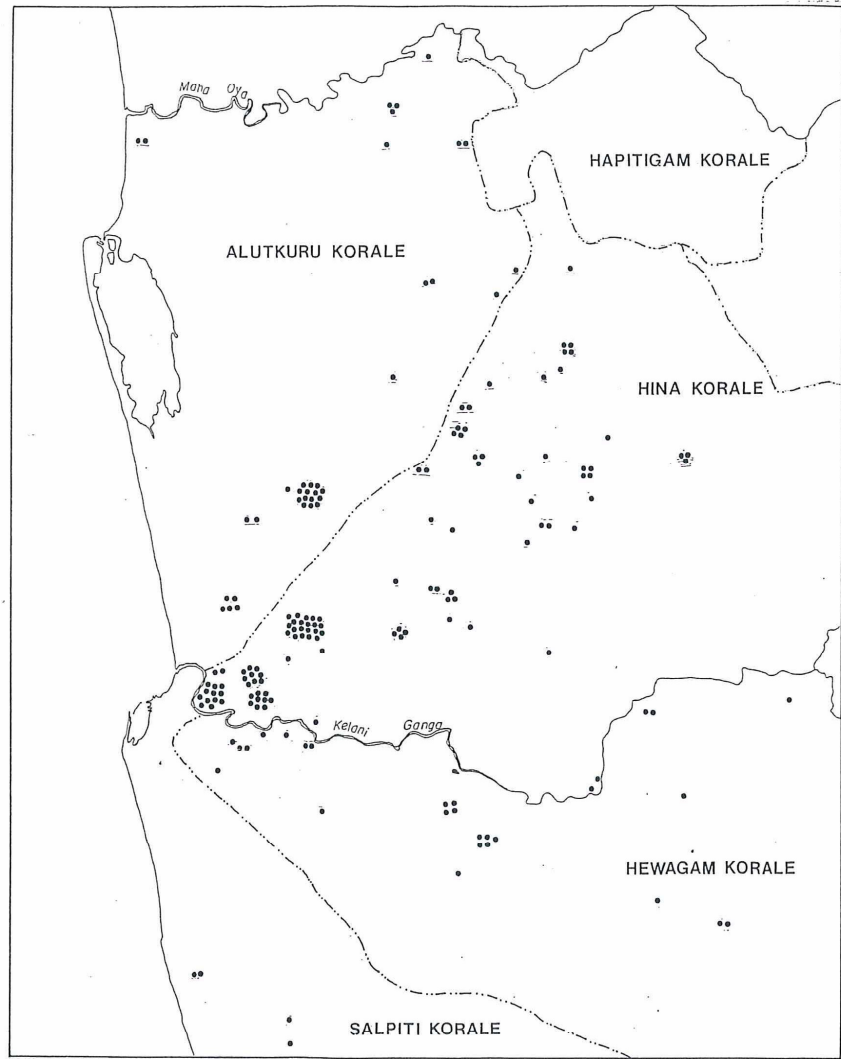
Map No. 8: Internal setting of Kahambilihena



Map No. 9: Coconut plantations in Hina *kōralē*
(with more than 200 trees)

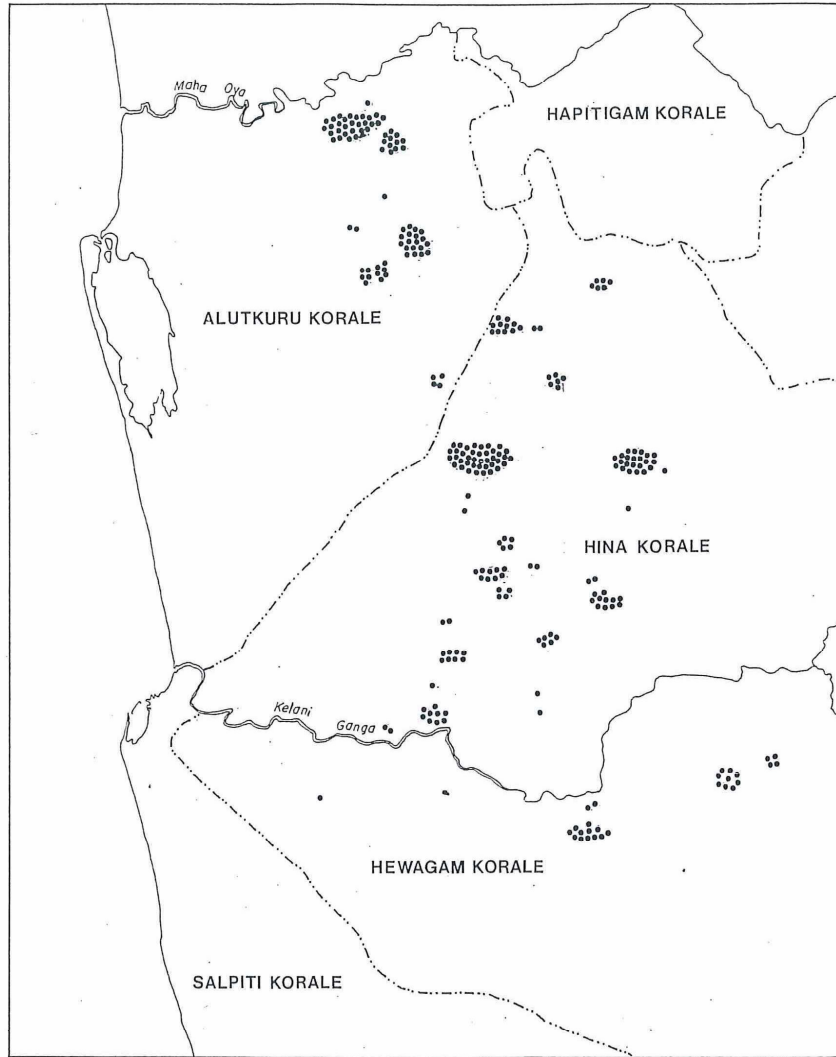


Map No. 10: Hakuru settlements in Hina, Alutkuru, Hewagam and Salpity *kōralē*



One dot represents one family

Map No. 11: Padu settlements in Hina, Alutkuru, Hewagam and Salpity *kōrale*



One dot represents one family

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Prologue

When I was a little boy, my grandmother used to leave home every now and then in the very early morning, well before dawn, with a bundle of carefully packed betel leaves. These betel leaves she grew in her household garden. Carrying a torch made out of coconut leaves, she set out for the open-air-market (*pola*) about two miles away. Sometimes I would join her. *En route* we joined other market-goers with the same produce, and even the occasional bullock cart full of betel leaves. I admit it was not pleasant for a child of five to be woken up so early in the morning, but once we arrived, it was exciting to see so many strangers bustling around the open-air market as the sky turned red to welcome the first rays of the rising sun. Āchchi sold her betel leaves to wholesale-buyers while I wandered around in her vicinity. After she purchased a bag of groceries in which dried fish occupied a central place and had safely placed her little money pouch with the remaining money inside her blouse, Āchchi and I would return home.

When I started my education, I used to cross the paddy-field together with my cousins and other children in the neighbourhood to go the school located next to the Catholic church in the adjacent village. A narrow earthen bund separating two paddy-fields had been converted into a footpath that crossed not only the paddy-field but also the village itself.

That was more than 35 years ago! Āchchi is no more. She was buried in a graveyard located in a far-away village. The open-air-market is gone, too. When I go back to the village, no longer as an insider but as a prodigal son, I see a lot of changes. The narrow footpath that we took to school has made way for a road that carries buses and trucks across the paddy-field, which is now virtually a fallow, barren plot of land. The large rock that stood firm in front of our house and gave us children a wonderful hiding place has been demolished and flattened by powerful explosives. Though these changes inevitably give me a feeling of nostalgic melancholy, at the same time I have grown up enough and experienced enough of the world to be able to place these changes in the context of the larger social and economic transformations that have shaped Sri Lanka over the last three or more decades.

In a broader sense, what is written in the following pages is an attempt to delve into the past, for better or worse, of the very landscape of the village where my grandmother used to grow betel leaves and to try to historicize it by using the cadastral *tombos* and other archival documents that I retraced in the Dutch East India Company (VOC) archives in Colombo and the Hague; having done so I hope to provide the reader a closer look at the early modern landscape of modern rural Sri Lanka.