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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Registering and Regulating Family Life: The School Thombos in Dutch Sri Lanka

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Abstract

In eighteenth-century, colonial Sri Lanka, the Dutch church kept extensive registers of the local population. These “school thombos” contain individual registration of baptism, marriage, school attendance and death. This article argues that the school thombos reveal moral control over family life by the Dutch East India Company and the Dutch Reformed Church, while offering locals a legal and religious identity to employ in negotiating the Dutch colonial bureaucracy. These rarely studied registers shed new light on Sri Lankan family history and the practices of Dutch colonialism. What do they tell us about conjunctures of locals with colonial religion in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka? The school thombo was an instrument used to register and regulate family life, with specific functions and uses by different actors. This article explores the format, objectives and use of the school thombo. Why was the school thombo created and who were registered in these sources? What were the micro practices of drawing up the school thombo? The article is supported by several case studies that illustrate how the school thombo found its way into family life while demonstrating the value of written identities.

In the National Archives of Sri Lanka, record group number one holds archives of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). Of them, an eighteenth-century register with yellowed pages contains a note with a single handwritten sentence in Dutch: “Let me know when Sabina was baptised.” The reverse of the note holds the response with Sabina’s baptism dates and the names of her parents, signed by a clerk named Fernando. This volume of bound papers holds more notes from Fernando, among others one that says, “my lord the thombo-keeper, I cannot read that ola....” The notes were tucked into a register called the school

thombo,¹ which were Dutch registers of baptized families. Why did Fernando's scribbled notes on baptism end up in the VOC archives?

Coastal Sri Lanka had been ruled by the Portuguese Estado da India since the sixteenth century, and after a 20-year war of conquest, the territory was taken over by the VOC in 1658. In the western coastal regions that are the focus of this study, the company kept extensive records of the local inhabitants. The VOC not only registered extended families and their lands for tax purposes, but also attempted to manage family life through the registration practices of the Dutch Reformed Church.² The central administrative point of the church was the *Scholarchale Vergadering* (School Board), linked with the ecclesiastical administration of the *Kerkenraad* (Church Council). The school thombos, created mainly from 1704 onwards by the VOC, functioned as a tool for registering details of families connected to the local village school. These were Protestant schools that the company and the church established on the island from the 1660s onwards to spread the Protestant faith and educate and monitor the population.³ Written in Dutch, the thombos list nuclear families, and for each individual, the age and dates of baptism, marriage, and death; as well as unique details such as when children started and finished school and when a person or family left the village. Significantly, the school thombos were embedded in the local community and existing scribal practices. Schoolmasters, appointed from among the local population, formed a vital information network.

The school thombos offer detailed, albeit colonially framed, demographic information about eighteenth-century families in Sri Lanka, and provide unique insight into interactions with colonial rule and colonial religion. The introduction to, and publication of extracts from the school thombos by Edmund Reimers is a useful base for further research, and work by Jur van Goor and Gerrit Jan Schutte refer to these registers, but they have not been studied extensively to date.⁴ Through this analysis of the school thombo, we argue that for Sri Lankans, the lived experiences of everyday colonialism in Sri Lanka were not restricted to courts and administrative structures, but entered the heart of the family through the negotiation of identity registration in church. By registering and regulating family life, the Dutch colonizer intervened in marriage, education, and religion.

As part of this special issue, our article further builds on recent historiography emphasising the importance of colonial paper trails. It shows that

¹ The Sri Lanka National Archives, Lot 1 *Archives of the Dutch Central Government of Coastal Ceylon, 1640–1796* (hereafter SLNA 1), inv. 3979, “School thombo Malabar (Tamil) School,” 81, 84.

² In this article, “(Dutch) Reformed” and “Protestantism”—in opposition to Roman Catholicism—will all be used to refer to *Nederduits Gereformeerd*, the specific Calvinist, Christian denomination that was de facto the Dutch state church during this period.

³ Bente de Leede, “Children Between Company and Church: Subject-Making in Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka, c. 1650–1790,” *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 135 (2020): 106.

⁴ Edmund Reimers, *The Dutch Parish Registers (schoolthombos) of Ceylon: Ambalangoda, Patabendimulla, Welitara and Gosgoda* (Colombo: The Times of Ceylon, 1950); Gerrit Jan Schutte, *Het Indisch Sion: De Gereformeerde kerk onder de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2003); and Jurrien van Goor, *Jan Kompenie as Schoolmaster: Dutch Education in Ceylon 1690–1795* (Groningen: Wolters Noordhoff, 1978).

colonial bureaucracy and law in South Asia did not exist as top-down, monolithic, normative institutions, but were rather more localized systems. To understand this function of colonial paperwork in empire, Bhavani Raman argues in *Document Raj* that it is necessary to deconstruct the networks, processes and actors involved in its production.⁵ We demonstrate that the school thombos were produced and used in a similarly localized, negotiated, and layered context. Paraphrasing Michael Szonyi, people do not interact with a unified state, but with the state's various agents.⁶ Local schoolmasters, ministers, clerks and thombo-keepers were heavily involved in creating records through supervising, gathering, and writing down information. Because the school thombos were embedded in the Dutch Reformed Churches and schools, the church and its European and Sri Lankan staff can be regarded as agents of the colonial company-state.

Moreover, registration could be a repressive tool and a form of legal empowerment. In their edited volume on registration, Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter explain how, in contrast to unilateral census-taking, registration is a bilateral process that offers both parties recognition.⁷ The existence of the school thombos meant that Sri Lankans acknowledged the Dutch churches and schools as representations of colonial bureaucracy, while being registered provided them legal personhood, official recognition of existence, and identity.⁸ Men, women, and children from different cultural and socioeconomic communities used the registers to further their social, religious, and legal interests within their own community and the colonial system, such as for baptism, marriage, and inheritance. In this article, we further explore the practices of this bilateral process in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka.

The prevalence of individual registration of the local population in an eighteenth-century Asian colony is not self-evident. Mughal and British rule in India did not see individual registration, only enumeration intended for taxation and revenue collection.⁹ In the Portuguese empire, Catholic missionaries only kept statistics of baptisms within the parish until censuses ordered by the king were taken from the year 1766.¹⁰ In Europe, registration was widespread, and was an important social, religious, and civil infrastructure in the Dutch Republic. The Reformed Church kept baptism and marriage registers, which the government accepted as civil registration. The church used such registers

⁵ Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj. Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3.

⁶ Michael Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 7.

⁷ Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter, "Editors' Introduction: Recognition and Registration: The Infrastructure of Personhood in World History," in *Registration and Recognition: Documenting the Person in World History*, ed. Keith Breckenridge and Simon Szreter (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 2012), 18–19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

⁹ Ravindran Gopinath, "Identity Registration in India During and After the Raj," in *Registration and Recognition*, 317–18.

¹⁰ Paulo de Matos, "Population Censuses in the Portuguese Empire, 1750–1820: Research Notes," *Romanian Journal of Population Studies* VII (2013): 1–17.

to monitor marriage practices, moral behavior, and access to poor relief, since the latter was organized by religious community. The records and their extracts were also used for personal identification throughout the country, and for church and state to monitor income and revenue.¹¹ But while the school thombos fit into this bureaucratic structure, both in the Netherlands and in its overseas territories, no similar registers exist outside of Sri Lanka. The VOC established similar school and church projects in the Indonesian Archipelago, especially in Java and the Moluccas, but only baptism and marriage registers, as well as enumerative statistics of local Christians, were created there.¹² Therefore, the form and content of the school thombo, as well as their position between otherwise existing church and state registrations calls for further analysis.

The bureaucracy of the VOC often entered the field of family law. Carla van Wamelen has shown the extensive regulation of family life by the VOC in Batavia, colonial Indonesia.¹³ In her work on eighteenth-century marriage contracts in Sri Lanka, Nadeera Rupesinghe has shown how family law was also a site of colonial negotiation.¹⁴ The VOC based its colonial legislation on Roman-Dutch law, and its Batavian variant influenced regulations on the family in Dutch Sri Lanka. Luc Bulten et al., in their analysis of Dutch inheritance regulation in Sri Lanka, based on land and extended family registration, show similar intrusion of the state in family affairs where property and tax law were concerned.¹⁵ Our argument builds on this research in two ways; first, by analyzing the position of the school thombo and its function as a register, which as a newly studied source offers a fresh approach to this period; and second, by displaying that the moral and social aspects of school and church registration were a significant part of the colonial legal practice. The creation and practices of the school thombos illustrate that the company's paper bureaucracy entered territories of moral regulation and the mundane family life of locals.

The rich historiography¹⁶ on colonial family life and religion, shown recently in a special issue by Geertje Mak et al. about late colonial child policies, reveals

¹¹ Henk Looijesteijn and Marco H. van Leeuwen, "Establishing and Registering Identity in the Dutch Republic," in *Registration and Recognition*, 212–43.

¹² Gerrit Knaap, *Kruidnagelen en Christenen: De Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie en de Bevolking van Ambon 1656–1696* (Leiden: Verhandelings van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde 212, 2004): 116–19.

¹³ Carla G. van Wamelen, *Family Life Onder de VOC: Een Handelscompagnie in Huwelijks- En Gezinszaken* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2014).

¹⁴ Nadeera Rupesinghe, "Navigating Pluralities Reluctantly: The Marriage Contract in Dutch Galle," *Itinerario* 42 (2018): 220–37.

¹⁵ Luc Bulten, Jan Kok, Dries Lyna, and Nadeera Rupesinghe, "Contested Conjugality? Sinhalese Marriage Practices in Eighteenth-Century Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka," *Annales de Démographie Historique* 1 (2018): 51–80.

¹⁶ Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); David Scott, "Colonial Governmentality," *Social Text* 13 (1995): 191–220; and Geertje A. Mak, Marit E. Monteiro, and Elisabeth Wesseling, "Child Separation. (Post)Colonial Policies and Practices in the Netherlands and Belgium," *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 135 (2020): 4–28.

similarities to eighteenth-century regulation of family life in Dutch Sri Lanka. Yet, the VOC's revenue-based objectives inherently differed from such later colonial domestication policies.¹⁷ Durba Ghosh includes South Asia and the eighteenth century, but in her social, cultural, and political analyses of colonial Indian family life, she focuses on Eurasian families, rather than on policies and registration intended for the Asian population itself.¹⁸

In a fresh approach to missionary registers, Sarah Walters has reflected on the use of colonial, religious registration in her historical demographic work in Africa. While the school thombos have no specific equal across Europe and colonial territories in the Global South, church registration has been valuable in historical demographic research. In her analysis of "moral demography" and the interaction between missionaries and the local population of colonial Tanzania, Walters studies registers created in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by Catholic, European missionaries. The Catholic missionaries operated separately from the colonial state, but created an infrastructure that enhanced cooperation between them. Despite these differences, the type of data and data collection in the parish registers is comparable to the school thombos. Walters argues that every event recorded in such registers reflects a moment of interaction with colonial religion and a transition in family life, or a "vital conjuncture." She shows how these moments were enforced by an external power, yet paradoxically strongly embedded in local communities and networks. Walters emphasizes the importance of understanding the social, religious, and administrative context of the registered communities and colonial society, as well as the registration process itself, to fully comprehend the information that parish registers convey.¹⁹ In Sri Lanka, existing social and moral repertoires co-emerged and competed with incipient Dutch, Protestant rule, and resulted in a bilateral process of negotiation. The registers are therefore a cultural translation of Lankan family life onto Dutch paper.

This article is an exploration of the context, creation, and content of the school thombos. How did the company and locals negotiate the registration? How were vital conjunctures registered by the various actors involved in the school thombo? What did religious identity registration offer locals in Dutch Sri Lanka? These are crucial first steps in understanding this source and its meaning for Sri Lankans in the eighteenth century. We argue that the school thombos reveal moral control over intimate family life by the company and the church, but at the same time offered Sri Lankans a legal and religious identity to employ in negotiating with the colonial government. First, we will situate the school thombo in its historical context. What was its position in the Dutch colonial bureaucracy in Sri Lanka? The second part of this article explores and explains the format and objectives of the school thombo. Who

¹⁷ De Leede, "Children Between."

¹⁸ Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Sarah Walters, "Becoming and Belonging in African Historical Demography, 1900–2000," in *Fertility, Conjuncture, Difference. Anthropological Approaches to the Heterogeneity of Modern Fertility Declines*, ed. Philip Krieger and Astrid Bochow (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 73–79, 94.

were registered? What were the micro-practices of drawing up the school thombo? What do they tell us about vital conjunctures in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka? In the final part, we will show how the school thombo found its way into family life, while demonstrating the lived experience of the potential value of written identities.

Situating the School Thombo

In the seventeenth century, when the Dutch conquered the Portuguese territories in Sri Lanka, the central kingdom of Kandy remained independent. While the majority was a Sinhala-speaking, Buddhist society, a significant Tamil-speaking Hindu and Muslim population also resided on the island, especially in the north and east. Farther from the coast, there was a predominantly Sinhalese society. Of the school thombos, only those for the southwest of Sri Lanka have remained; this area is therefore our main focus.

The word “thombo” has its origins in the Portuguese word *tombo* for book or register. In seventeenth-century Sri Lanka, the Dutch continued to use the word for their registers of land-holding groups. This was an adaption of Portuguese practices, which in turn had incorporated earlier practices of land registration.²⁰ These cadastral registers contained registrations beyond nuclear families or households, recording extended families in relation to their land and inheritance. They differ vastly in format from the school thombos. The word “thombo” in this context is therefore most likely not a particular type of register, but rather a general term for various practices of registration. Despite the overlap of time and space with the cadastral thombos, comparison with the school thombos is difficult. The main reason is that the school thombo corresponds with the structure of village schools and churches, while the cadastral thombo mostly follows a structure based on villages within *pattus*, which are sub-districts within the larger *korales* (districts).²¹ In both cases, however, information was actively provided by villagers, as we will discuss further below. Links between the cadastral and school thombo should therefore not be sought on paper or content, but rather in the practice of clerks and thombo-keepers maintaining them, and the local networks for information gathering.

In their territories, the Dutch faced existing normative, administrative, and educational systems. Scholarly instruction in Sri Lanka was inherently connected to religion, particularly the spread of Buddhism, in turn supported by royal patronage.²² Despite such educational practices, there is no evidence for the registration of pupils who came to the temple for learning. In general, family life was devoid of written registration, as it was regulated at a village level. Villages did have scribes, *schrijvers* in Dutch, *liyanna* in Sinhala. Many communities had men holding this sub caste-like position, which often was

²⁰ Dries Lyna and Luc Bulten, “Classifications at Work: Social Categories and Dutch Bureaucracy in Colonial Sri Lanka,” *Itinerario* 45 (2021): 260.

²¹ Bulten, Kok, Lyna and Rupesinghe, “Contested Conjugality,” 64–65.

²² *Education in Ceylon (from the Sixth Century BC to the Present Day): A Centenary Volume* (Colombo: Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, 1969), xxx–xxxi; and De Leede, “Children Between,” 115.

an inherited, traditional craft. It is unclear what their tasks were. Presumably, their function resembled that of the scribe castes in British India, where the *kanakkupillai* were scribes who operated at the lowest, village level, and wrote on palm leaves, as Raman shows in her analysis. They were part of the local information networks in communities and villages.²³ In Sri Lanka, the washer caste was also connected to such networks, as a result of its involvement with intimate family rituals such as childbirth.

Roman Catholic missionaries, who were independent of their contemporary Portuguese, political administration, continued the tradition of combining religion and elementary education. They even replaced certain Buddhist spaces with their own, building on the legitimacy of local educational structures. Additionally, the missionaries introduced European, Christian moral repertoires such as baptism of children and consecration of marriage in church.²⁴

In contrast to its Roman Catholic predecessor, the Dutch Reformed Church was a “state church,” accompanying the VOC to its colonies. The church was supported, funded, and controlled by the company-state. Protestantism heavily influenced the moral legislation of the Dutch Republic and consequently of the territories of the VOC; for example, through the emphasis on monogamous, registered marriage. The Church Council established schools that doubled as churches on Sundays, organized around administrative centres such as Galle, Jaffna, and Colombo. The latter was the capital of the VOC territories, and still the most dominant city in Sri Lanka. The locations of the Protestant village schools were in turn continuations of previous Buddhist and Catholic educational and religious spaces. The Dutch also established seminaries near Jaffna and Colombo for the higher education of schoolmasters, clerks, and potential Protestant ministers. Frequented by sons of the local elite, these seminaries were as Jur van Goor has argued, vehicles for social, cultural, and moral influence and control over the pupils and through them the population.²⁵ In the village schools, both boys and girls were taught to read and write in their vernacular. The schools functioned regionally, since one central school provided education to children from several surrounding communities. All people “belonging to a school” lived at a maximum distance of an approximately 2-hour walk, so that they could leave from home at sunrise and reach the building at around 8 or 9 o’clock in the morning. Girls often did not go to school, given the refusal of the Sinhalese to teach pubescent girls in public.²⁶

The school thombo records were created in many ways. First, each school had several schoolmasters who gathered information. They were local men who were ideally members of the Protestant church and trained at the seminaries, but they were often local village scribes who had not received a higher Protestant education. The post of schoolmaster, at least that of the headmaster,

²³ Raman, *Document Raj*, 37–38.

²⁴ De Leede, “Children Between,” 115; Van Goor, *Jan Kompenie*, 115–16, 142; Swarna Jayaweera, “Schooling in Sri Lanka,” in *Going to School in South Asia*, ed. Amita Gupta (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007), 171–72; and G.P.V. Somaratna, “The Superficial Success of the Reformation and the Trials of the Catholic Church (1658–1796) in Sri Lanka,” *Journal of the Colombo Theological Seminary* 2 (2003): 112.

²⁵ Van Goor, *Jan Kompenie*; and De Leede, “Children Between,” 118.

²⁶ De Leede, “Children Between,” 115–17.

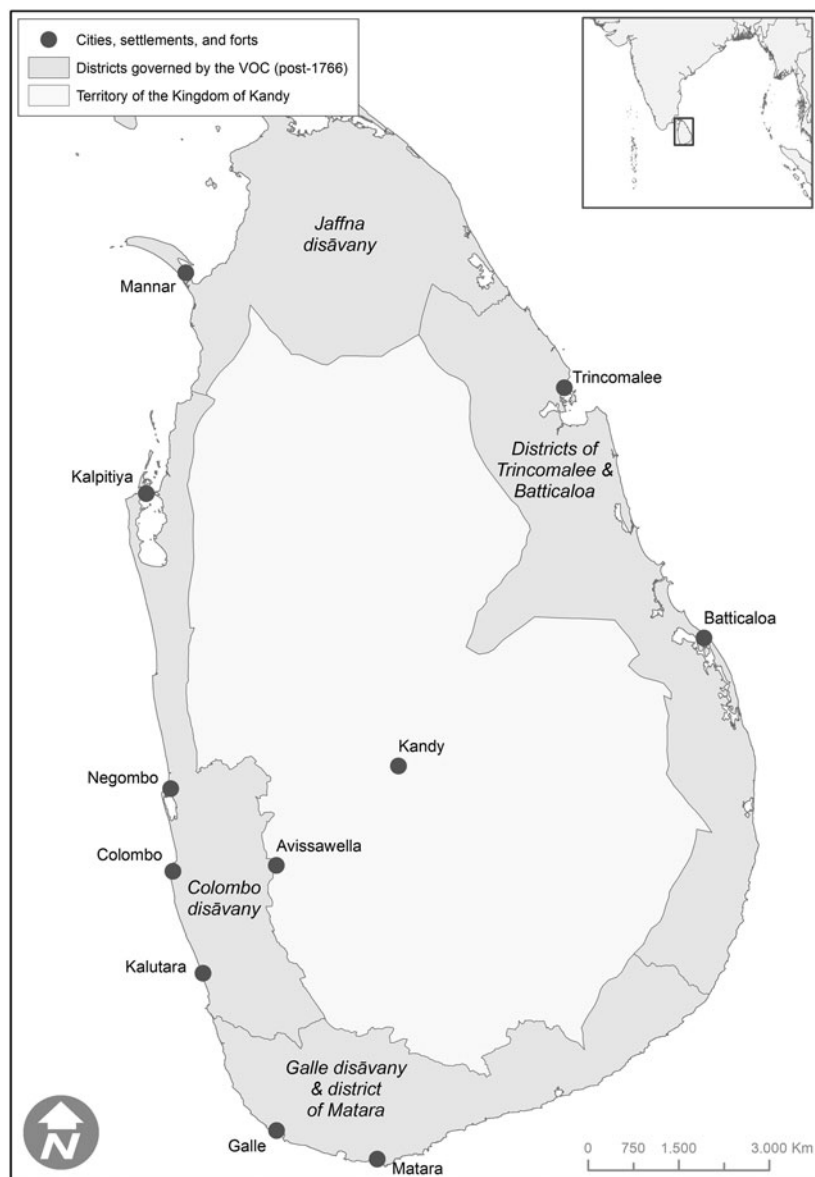


Figure 1. Map of eighteenth-century Sri Lanka. The areas marked as VOC (post-1766) were in general already under VOC-rule. This map represents the (re-)established borders after the 1766 conflict with Kandy. © Thijs Hermesen (Humanities Lab, Faculty of Arts, Radboud University).

came with an allocation of land and a house next to the church, which made it a desirable position. The schoolmasters were also expected to register births, marriages, and deaths in the villages belonging to their school. The

schoolmasters used their existing scribal network, and were assisted by local informants such as the aforementioned washer caste.²⁷ Every 3 months, the schoolmasters reported to the thombo-keeper in Colombo or Galle and to the Church Council. Second, the locals could approach the thombo-keeper in Colombo himself or be summoned by the Church Council to discuss missing or false records. The thombo-keeper often joined the schoolmasters in their visit to the Church Council in order to report other updates that had been reported to him.²⁸ Third, some school thombos were renewed. Older records were then revised and copied into a new book that continued the village registration.

The final and most common method for the creation of the school thombo was registration on visitation day. The senior ministers from the city toured each village school in a parade, together with the thombo keeper and a *scholarch*, a government official who presided over the schools as a member of the School Board. On this ceremonialized visitation, ministers examined the schools' masters and pupils. If children successfully completed the oral examination, boys considered old enough to enter the labor service, or girls old enough to marry, were ceremonially discharged—*gelargeerd*—by presenting them with a *largatie ola*.²⁹ Although such olas are not extant in the archives, they are referred to in the school thombo. After the *largatie* ceremonies, the *scholarch* imposed fines on, for example, those who were not registered as married or who did not send their children to school. The minister continued his visitation by consecrating marriages and baptizing children. During the day, the school thombo-keeper recorded *largaties*, baptisms, and marriages in the thombo, including whether a child had started school or had been discharged without a *largatie ola*. Here too, the schoolmaster played an intermediary role.³⁰

The Micro-Practices of the School Thombo

Now that we have explained how the school thombos were created, we will open the registers themselves. All phases of family life described were experiences of interaction and negotiation with the colonial church. How were these vital conjunctures reflected on paper? To answer this, the format, content, and micro-practices of the school thombo must be understood. In the following, we will provide a general qualitative analysis of the school thombos of the Colombo province.

Of the fifty or so extant school thombos, the earliest were first created in 1704 and others were created in the 1740s. Some have two volumes, some

²⁷ Lodewijk Hovy, *Ceylonees plakkaatboek: Plakkaten en andere wetten uitgevaardigd door het Nederlandse bestuur op Ceylon, 1638–1796. Deel I en II* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991): Plakkaat no. 195, 257, 684 (7); and Van Goor, *Jan Kompenie*, 116–17.

²⁸ Klaus Koschorke, ed. *Summaries of the Minutes of the Consistory of the Dutch Reformed Church in Colombo held at the Wolvendaal Church, Colombo (1735–1797)* 4A.1–4, trans. Samuel A. Mottau (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2011); and “Censura Morum of 28th June 1754” (hereafter *Minutes*, CM), “CM March 21, 1755.”

²⁹ De Leede, “Children Between,” 127–28.

³⁰ For more on church and school fines, see *ibid.*, 122–23.

are only sparsely filled, and some are predominantly of the British period. While the template of the school thombos has slight variations within the Dutch territory on the island and during the eighteenth century, in general it is fairly consistent. Each school corresponded with one school thombo. While there were separate Dutch, Sinhala, and Tamil schools, the registers were all in Dutch. One school thombo comprised the registers of several communities belonging to a school, organized as sections of the register and indexed on the first page. These communities often overlapped with occupations or castes, as well as geographical locations; for example, *Moorse Straat* (Moor street), *Visschers Buiten* (fishermen living outside of the city), or *Hoenoe Pitie* (Hunupitiya, the residence of Hunu caste members).³¹

The entries were organized by nuclear family and in general, this resulted in the registration of an equal number of adult men and women. The records consist of columns to enter the names of the father, mother, and children; age when baptized; baptism date; school start date; school discharge date; marriage date; and whether someone had migrated or died. Each registration represents a conjuncture with the colonial church. Let us consider closely one family registered in the school thombo of Pas Betaal (Figure 2) near current-day Wattala, some 10 km north of Colombo Fort. Of the seven communities that comprised the Pas Betaal school thombo, Bastian and Catharina Farnando were recorded under ‘Hunupitiya’, a reference to the physical location where the *hunu* caste lived. They were registered with their seven children, of whom all but one were baptized before they were 1 year old, and who had started school at either 8, 10, or 12 years of age. In general, for parents, only the marriage date is entered, and for children, their ages and baptism dates are entered, while school dates were added less frequently. Of the marriage between Bastian and Catharina, we only know that it was officiated and recorded in Negombo. Their children are registered as having started school, but their discharge from school has not been recorded. In general, the recorded ages of children in the school thombos varied, some were only 8 days old when registered, others were 2, 6, or 20 years and older. This depended on the ability and willingness of a parent to register their child at the minister’s visitation, as well as the degree of control that the schoolmaster and other agents of administration had within these villages.³²

On the page with the registration of the Farnandos (see Figure 2), Francina Farnando’s baptism in 1758 precedes that of the family below, whose first child was baptized in 1709. Families were seemingly registered in order of appearance at the visitation, but updates on families such as school discharge or Francina’s late baptism complicate this pre-existing sequence on the pages. Creating further confusion, some entries have been inserted wherever there was blank space available, evident from the varying ink and handwriting.

In the Farnando family, the oldest daughter Maria is crossed out. A note in the last column indicates that this was because she moved to Colombo. It was common to cross out a family member’s name when they died, married, or

³¹ SLNA 1/4083, “School thombo Pas Betaal (Wattala)”; and SLNA 1/3979.

³² SLNA 1/4083.

[illegible]

Figure 2. A page from the Pas Betaal (Wattala) School Thombo. Bastian and Catharina Farnando are the first two individuals on the left side, in the “parents” column. SLNA 1/4083, 99.

migrated. Clerks would then refer to the new place of residence or school thombo, enabling the tracing of families through generations. The second daughter Angela Farnando's record refers to page 400 of the same thombo, where she is registered with her husband and their children. Similarly, the words "here below" refer to the same practice of cross-referencing but on the same page.³³ These micro-practices of updating made the school thombos a "living register": a dynamic record of family life, displaying the interaction of families with a colonial, Christian registration, which, significantly, can to some extent be reconstructed.

Bastian Farnando's full registered identity in the school thombo was *Hoenoe Anthonij Farnandogelij Bastian Farnando, kalkbrander*. This meant that he was of the *hunu*, or lime burner caste, the son of Anthony Farnando, and also worked as a lime burner. In many cases, a prefix such as *hoenoe*³⁴ was not given, and there was no separate column to register caste. Professions such as *zilveramid* (silversmith) against the names of fathers, however, indicated caste groups as well.³⁵ Fathers and mothers were recorded with separate surnames. Bastian only had, or had provided the clerk with, a Christian name, but in many cases for the father, and sometimes the mother, both Sinhala and Christian names were given. Sinhalese "ge" names, or Sinhalized names such as "Farnandogelij," provide information on family lineage, as does the suffix *magel* or *magen* in some Tamil-speaking communities. Children were only identified by their first name, recognized exclusively in the context of their family.

Of the approximately 2,000,000 inhabitants of eighteenth-century Sri Lanka, approximately 1,000,000 lived in an area formally under Dutch rule. In theory, all inhabitants in VOC territories were expected to attend Protestant church services and schools, and thus were to be registered in the school thombos. By all existing Dutch accounts however, around a third of the population was in some way registered by the church. In the Colombo province, around 100,000 adults were registered, and in the official school reports around 12,000 children were enumerated as attending the Dutch schools each year. The number of people registered in the extant school thombos matches these reports. The number of children per school varied greatly however; some schools were attended by more than 200 children per year, while others barely saw a handful of children.

The school thombo records can provide information on which specific families and communities were registered by the Church.³⁶ Quantitative research into

³³ SLNA 1/3990, "School Thombo Slave Island," 4; and SLNA 1/4012, "School thombo Alutgama."

³⁴ Dutch spelling for *hunu*.

³⁵ SLNA 1/4083, 94; and SLNA 1/3992, "School thombo Wolvendaal."

³⁶ Nationaal Archief, *Inventaris van het archief van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC)*, 1602–1795, 1.04.02 (hereafter NL-HaNa, VOC), inv. 2925, "Visitatierapport Colombo, Galle and Trincomalee 1758," f. 964–992; Stadsarchief Amsterdam, 379 *Archief van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk: Classis Amsterdam* (hereafter SA, Classis), inv. 203, "Letter from Colombo to the Classis 1710," f. 93; SA, Classis 204, "Visitatierapport Galle 1758," f. 56–83; NL-HaNa, VOC 2445, f. 1282–1294; NL-HaNa, VOC 3997, f. 1483–1484; and Pim de Zwart, "Population, Labour and Living Standards in Early Modern Ceylon: An Empirical Contribution to the Divergence Debate," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 49 (2012): 365–95.

these sources is still a work in progress, but could provide tremendous insight into family relations, gender distribution, and infancy survival rates, as well as survival of children between infancy and school-attendance age. A study into the school thombos could build further on early modern historical demography based on parish registers in Europe as well as other Dutch thombos in Sri Lanka.³⁷ Although school thombo data are detailed, they cannot be seen as a comprehensive representation of a community. Plural religious practices and political motivations for baptism require that we do not consider the registered as a rigid cultural and religious community. Rather, they represented a fluid cross-section of coastal society that had been registered as Protestant by the colonial state, predominantly after their baptism. Many had previously been Catholic, since the Dutch attempted to counteract any remaining loyalty to the Catholic Portuguese. Muslims were the exception, since the Dutch made no attempt to convert them.

The church had other means to register its congregation as well. For example, separate baptism and marriage scrolls were maintained and compared with school thombos to complement each other. The school thombo seems to have been a register in between church and state registration. It closely recorded those spaces and people that the company had a particular economic interest in; for example, the school thombo for the slave school on Slave Island, Colombo. This thombo specifically states that it is a “thombo for the Christian slaves owned by the company,” illustrating the desire to record Christian slaves separately from other Christians and non-Christian enslaved people.³⁸ Moreover, in areas where the Dutch traditionally had more economic or political control, the school thombos were substantial, such as in the Kalutara district. This was an area with many cinnamon plantations, and Catholic and Protestant churches.³⁹ In contrast, Hanwella, a village eastward from Colombo and close to Kandyan territory, had poorly attended schools and empty school thombos.⁴⁰ The school thombo afforded control to the company in two ways. First, it supported normative control over those who were baptized or wanted to baptize their children. This enabled close regulation of family life, as well as loyalty to the Protestant company-state. Second, De Leede has argued how the unique school entry and discharge dates in the school thombo are linked to the mandatory labor that the VOC required. Registering school dates meant that children could be monitored and controlled until their discharge from school, after which they were expected to perform labor services. VOC representatives and members of the School Board were therefore substantially involved with *largatie* and school visitation.⁴¹

³⁷ Such as E.A. Wrigley, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580-1837* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Fabian F. Drixler and Jan Kok, “A Lost Family-Planning Regime in Eighteenth-Century Ceylon,” *Population Studies* 70 (2016): 93–114.

³⁸ SLNA 1/3990-3991.

³⁹ De Leede, “Children Between,” 127.

⁴⁰ NL-HaNa, VOC, 2925, f. 981; SLNA 1/3998-9, “School thombo Hanwella”; and SLNA1/4009, “School thombo Pannebakkerie Slave School (Weragoda).”

⁴¹ De Leede, “Children Between,” 127.

The school thombo-keeper remains a rather mysterious person within the Dutch colonial system. Both Galle and Colombo had their own thombo-keeper, often local, but sometimes also European. While he initially appears to have been predominantly a record-keeping clerk with his own office in the city, the Church Council also assigned the thombo-keeper tasks similar to those of the sexton of the church. As such, the thombo-keeper maintained the archives of the church, acted as a messenger for Church Council meetings, and inquired into cases brought before the council, such as those concerning infidelity or other reasons to bar congregation members from Holy Communion. Moreover, it was the thombo-keeper who was responsible for inviting the schoolmasters by *ola* to the 3-monthly reporting session. The thombo-keeper was also sought out by ministers, schoolmasters, and inhabitants from both villages and the city to update the registers.⁴²

While he was working for the church, it is assumed that the thombo-keeper was officially on the payroll of the VOC, as was the case for many church personnel in this period. Joan Alwis Wijewardena Seneviratne appears to have been both a thombo-keeper of the cadastral registration and the school thombo, but it is unclear whether he held two posts, or whether they were a single office.⁴³ This varied over time and by person. In most sources, the school thombo-keeper is referred to as a distinct position, but it is not referred to separately in the *Plakkaatboeken*, the published ordinances of the VOC.⁴⁴ Despite the importance of the thombos and the power they afforded him, the thombo-keeper was considered a low-level clerk in the colonial hierarchy.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the school thombo-keepers were literal intermediaries between locals and Dutch paperwork. In at least one case, the thombo-keeper also co-signed a baptism certificate, which accentuates his position as a representative of legitimacy.⁴⁶ For some school thombo-keepers, the position was the start of a more illustrious career within the VOC administration. Joan Alwis in Colombo and Nicolaas Dias Abeyasinghe, school thombo-keeper of Galle, were later promoted to the post of *mahamudaliyar* to the governor. This was the highest rank that a local could hold within the VOC government. Their relationships with the Dutch were honored by the gold medals that they received for their allegiance to the VOC.⁴⁷

There are no extant instructions on creating and maintaining the school thombos. From the clerk Fernando's notes mentioned, it is clear that the thombo-keeper was not the only intermediary in the administration of the

⁴² *Minutes*, "CM April 5, 1754", "CM June 28, 1743", "CM November 2, 1750", "CM December 28, 1753."

⁴³ *Minutes*, "CM June 28, 1743", "CM June 22, 1753"; and Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, 491.

⁴⁴ *Minutes*, "CM January 11, 1786," "CM October 3, 1787."

⁴⁵ Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, 560.

⁴⁶ *Minutes*, "CM June 22, 1753."

⁴⁷ G. P. Sanders, "Joan Aalwis Wijewardene Senewiratne en de uijtgebreidheid van een mostaart Zaatje. Een Ceylonese beloningspenning uitgereikt door de Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie in 1762," *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 42 (1994): 13–36; and Nadeera Rupesinghe, "Negotiating Custom: Colonial Lawmaking in the Galle Landraad" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2016), 62.

school thombo. By comparing several school thombos we have found shared “micro-practices of writing,”⁴⁸ which have been collectively created, remembered, and continued by thombo-keepers, schoolmasters, and clerks. In several entries, cases that were technically against the law were registered. Illegitimacy was noted by the word *onecht* (illegitimate) before a child’s name. In other cases, “mass.” behind the entry of a couple referred to *massebadoe*, which meant any unregistered cohabitation that the Dutch deemed unlawful.⁴⁹ In a less explicit way, this practice was revealed by children whose baptism dates precede that of the marriage date of the parents. Comments in the records also refer to accepted legal practices; for example, “this person has been baptised in the other school in Galle,” or “this person is the freed slave of...” In such notes, information such as “married to a *misties*” (Eurasian), “blind,” “child from her first marriage,” or “twins,” conveys intimate details about individuals and family relations. If family relationships differed from the template of the school thombo, as in the case of adopted children or children from previous marriages, this was generally specified. At times, a lone individual, a couple without children, or a family with one parent were registered.⁵⁰ This unveils the many forms of a household within villages, and indicates the intention of registering not only those who fitted the formula of the nuclear family, but also everyone who was regarded as part of the church.

The school thombo can, however, also prove to be lacking particular details, being mainly a snapshot of a moment in time. Herman Tieken has published a bundle of letters from members of the Ondaatje family to their son and cousin Nicolaas Ondaatje in South Africa, written in Tamil.⁵¹ Born in Colombo, Nicolaas Ondaatje worked as clerk for a minister in Galle, but was exiled to the Cape following a court case that incriminated the minister. The story of his career and exile is reflected in his school thombo record with the brief: “to Galle 1724” followed by “sent to the Cape.” In this case, cross-referencing the thombo with the letters reveals that only a few of Nicolaas’s nine siblings had been entered in the school thombo.⁵²

These gaps in registration can be explained, since some siblings had already started their own family at the time of registration and can be found elsewhere in the thombo.⁵³ Others may not have been registered in this thombo at all. While we know when and how the school thombo-keeper, ministers, *scholar-chen*, and schoolmasters gathered information, it is important to emphasize the necessity of bilateral recognition in the process of registration. Despite colonial coercion through fines and corporal punishment, inhabitants could

⁴⁸ Raman, *Document Raj*, 2.

⁴⁹ For such types of cohabitation, see Rupesinghe, “Navigating Pluralities Reluctantly,” 223–27; and Jan Kok, Luc Bulten, and Bente de Leede, “Persecuted or Permitted? Fraternal Polyandry in a Calvinist colony, Sri Lanka (Ceylon), Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” *Continuity and Change* 36 (2021): 337.

⁵⁰ SLNA 1/3979, 31–32.

⁵¹ Herman Tieken, *Between Colombo and the Cape: Letters in Tamil, Dutch and Sinhala, Sent to Nicolaas Ondaatje from Ceylon, Exile at the Cape of Good Hope (1728–1737)* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2015).

⁵² SLNA 1/3979, 45.

⁵³ SLNA 1/3979, 47.

simply abscond from the visitations and avoid registration of either their whole family or a part of it.⁵⁴ At times, this was recorded by writing “absent” and the year of the visitation against the record of an individual. For many families, only their baptism dates exist. In general, within a community section of the register, baptism dates are often around the same months, year after year, supporting the idea that visitations by the ministers had become yearly, ritualized, performative ceremonies, anticipated by the population and schoolmaster.⁵⁵

Lacunas in these dates indicate a disturbance of these repetitive ceremonies. In the Hunupitiya school thombo, a conflict between caste communities and the schoolmaster is visible in a gap in registration of the entire *hunu* community, which lasted from the 1730s until 1758, when Catharina and Bastian’s youngest daughter Francina was baptized at the age of 20. A few of these informational gaps can be filled by comparing new versions of thombos to previous ones, which exposes changes in families over time. Deceased children, new marriages, and additional children would have remained invisible if not for the updated books. In the case of the Ondaatje letters, cross-referencing to the school thombo unearthed the previously unknown name of Nicolaas’ father: Joan Jurriaan Ondaatje.⁵⁶ Cross-referencing the school thombo with sources such as baptism and marriage registers enables tracing life courses as well, although extensive referencing is complicated by the inconsistency of the sources.

VOC rule in Sri Lanka ended in the 1790s, with a transition period under the British East India Company and subsequent takeover by the British crown in the early nineteenth century. However, there was continuity in school and church registration from Dutch to British rule, as families and their records in the school thombos extended into the nineteenth century. In registers created later in the eighteenth century, columns on school dates were omitted, such as in the school thombo of Hanwella. In others, families and updates from the nineteenth century were inserted in between entries from earlier times. Well into the 1820s, the Dutch Reformed schools and churches continued to function as administrative centers despite being separated from the company-state, and Sri Lankan families continued to be registered in the school thombos.

Legal and Religious Identities

Returning to our clerk Fernando and the brief notes that he exchanged with the thombo-keeper, we see that Fernando’s work on the school thombo involved not only the insertion but also the extraction of information. Fernando reported that he was unable to find the records of the man whom a girl named Salvina wanted to marry. While her baptism could be confirmed, Fernando suggested that the groom’s records must be in another school thombo, since he was from outside of the city and thus belonged to another school. On yet another occasion, the thombo-keeper reported that he

⁵⁴ De Leede, “Children Between,” 121–24.

⁵⁵ SLNA 1/3979, 76; SLNA 1/3998; SLNA 1/4028, 6; and SLNA 1/4083.

⁵⁶ SLNA 1/3979, 45.

registered a Don Philip Kolmde in the thombo on August 15, 1788, after Don Philip proved his baptism by presenting an ola from a schoolmaster.⁵⁷ Such short, handwritten notes demonstrate the practices of the school thombo registration. What was expected of the schoolmaster, the thombo-keeper, and his clerk, and why did lay people like Salvina and Don Philip engage with these records?

Registration in the school thombo served the church in enumerating and monitoring the behavior of its congregations. It also afforded the VOC control over its labor population. Yet, the school thombo was the result of a bilateral process. Baptisms, marriages, and education were sites of negotiation. In this section, we discuss how the school thombos were used by the registered. Szonyi argues that such interaction with the state was not explicit resistance or collaboration, but rather the middle ground between the two, through subtle expressions and mundane acts.⁵⁸ In many cases, the school thombo registration seemed to be something that the registered simply accepted and tried to make use of to fulfil their interests.

Protestant rituals potentially had spiritual value to locals, but just as in the Dutch Republic, religious registration also provided a legal personhood that was equally important to secure rights and privileges, such as education, access to poor relief, and potential advancement in the hierarchy of the colonial system. Since power and religion were inherently entwined on the island, many locals believed that they were expressing their loyalty to the company by being baptized in the Dutch church. To the *Chettiar* community, the *salagama* (cinnamon peelers) and washer castes, and the enslaved, being registered as Protestant could be beneficial in circumventing dominant caste groups and attaining positions of power.⁵⁹ For those dominant groups, religious registration could mean retaining socio-political power within a community.

The Church Council and School Board had no legal jurisdiction, but they had influence over the poor relief system and could excommunicate members of the church and thereby exclude them from access to jobs within the company, as well as refer cases of perceived misbehavior to the public prosecutor.⁶⁰ The diaconate, the commission that regulated Protestant poor relief, had been separated from the church by the company. Still, its financial aid and orphanages were destined explicitly for those baptized in the Reformed Church. Although the school thombo is not explicitly mentioned in the diaconate records, to navigate the relief system, Sri Lankans required written proof of baptism, which the school thombos could provide.⁶¹ As the clerk Fernando's notes show, this was not the only time a baptism record was necessary.

⁵⁷ SLNA 1/3979, 79, 83, 96.

⁵⁸ Szonyi, *The Art of Being Governed*, 7–8.

⁵⁹ Kitsiri Malalagoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750–1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976): 46–49, 101–3; Kate Ekama, “Precarious Freedom: Manumission in Eighteenth-Century Colombo,” *Journal of Social History* 54 (2020): 88–108; and Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, 220, 263–64, 322–28, 570–71, 749, 758–59, 778.

⁶⁰ SA, *Classis* 204, 105–7.

⁶¹ Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, 104, 442 (7), 443, 556; and SLNA 1/4094, *Meeting of the Diaconate*, February 23, 1758.

Paper proof had an important place in the Reformed Church. As a result, accuracy was important for both the church and registered persons. The school thombo served as a database to be consulted on requests for marriage and baptism permits. Marriages in church were only permitted for those with registered baptisms. Registering marriage was important, not only because of potential punishment, but also because children born outside of a registered Dutch Reformed union were generally considered illegitimate, which in turn complicated access to baptism, marriage, and inheritance. People were aware of the requirement for baptism, and negotiated with the Church Council to establish the status quo, if for example they found out that their baptism was not recorded in the school thombos. This was allowed by the council only when they could produce written proof from several witnesses or the minister who had performed the baptism. Extracts from the baptism registers were not considered sufficient proof, and generally, neither were oral testimonies, except when provided by the minister who had performed the baptism. Once a baptism was entered in the school thombo, it carried significant weight, since an extract of this record was considered valid proof for entry in baptism registers and approval of marriage permits. The school thombo was thus either a bargaining tool or an objective outcome. This applied particularly to Catholics, who petitioned to have their Catholic baptisms registered in the Protestant school thombos. This controversial, but common, practice was legalized in the 1760s.⁶²

The importance of being baptized also led to what the Protestant ministers considered to be misuse of this status. The Reverend Bronsveld of Colombo wrote to his fellow church councilmen in 1759 that those who did not attend the Reformed Church should “be removed from our Tombo, in so far as they, according to the laws of the land, are not loyal to us and have therefore no lawful rights according to the placcaat [ordinance].”⁶³ Bronsveld did not only refer to religious and social rights. Another site, aside from the church, where a school thombo entry could be both useful and detrimental was in the legal forums established by the Dutch. Since the Dutch attempted to import their laws laced with moral repertoires such as legitimacy to Sri Lanka, locals were aware of how to utilize baptism records for the purpose of inheritance.

In a case brought forward in the Galle *Landraad* in 1788,⁶⁴ two Sinhalese men claimed that their brother-in-law, the deceased Kottegodage Daniel, had been an “illegitimate” son. With their claim, the brothers-in-law contested Daniel’s inheritance of land and the corresponding military position of *lascarin* (soldier), which were now held by his widow Gimara and their two sons. The plaintiffs

⁶² *Minutes*, “Extraordinary Meeting of 27nd July 1751” (hereafter EM), “EM July 11, 1752,” “EM October 28, 1754,” “CM March 3, 1755,” “EM August 25, 1755,” “EM November 15, 1757,” “Ordinary Meeting of June 20, 1768,” “CM September 29, 1779”; Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, 232; and Schutte, *Het Indisch Sion*, 183.

⁶³ *Minutes*, “EM May 17, 1759.”

⁶⁴ The documents of this case can be found in SLNA 1/1514, “Galle Political Council Minutes,” October 29, 1789; SLNA 1/6515, “Minutes, Galle Landraad,” (hereafter Minutes GL), July 2, 1788 f. 167r, January 24, 1789 f. 197v, May 30, 1789 f. 229v, February 27, 1790 f. 280v.

based their argument partly on a difference between the cadastral and school thombo.

The Galle Landraad was a district court of mostly European judges with local headmen to advise them. Daniel's case begins with the cadastral thombo registration in the village of Mipe in 1751.⁶⁵ He was registered as a son of Kottegodage Philippu, a 43-year-old *lascarin*. Philippu and his wife also had three daughters who were older than Daniel, two of whom were living away. Philippu was said to have personally reported Daniel (then 8 years of age) as his legitimate son.

The plaintiffs, Johan de Silva, a former *vidāne* of Pilaane, and Melagodege Jantje, were married to Philippu's two older daughters. After the deaths of Philippu and Daniel, De Silva and Jantje contested Daniel's legitimacy because they wanted the inheritance of the *lascarin* service and the lands granted for that service to be transferred to themselves instead of Daniel's sons. The Landraad decided that an inquiry should be held in the village, by the thombo-keeper of the cadastral registration, members of the Landraad, village heads, and all the heirs.⁶⁶ De Silva and Jantje pleaded their case at the inquiry with an extract from the school thombo providing a crucial piece of evidence. In the school thombo, Daniel was registered not as a son of Philippu and his wife, but as the baptized son of Philippu's sister-in-law, his wife's sister Manege Johange Jibika. Jibika orally confirmed this. It was thus concluded that Daniel was "no legitimate son of Kottegodage Philippu."⁶⁷

But Philippu had no male heir other than the illegitimate son he had had with Jibika. By navigating new registration practices and ensuring Daniel's recognition in the cadastral thombo, Philippu attempted to secure his legacy. If he was aware of the conflicting school thombo registration, Philippu may have believed that the cadastral thombo would have the final word about ownership of land. His story reveals the complexity of Dutch registrations and (mis)understandings of them. The requirement for registration was novel, and possible contradictions and complications could have escaped locals or were not deemed relevant. Philippu's sons-in-law used the discrepancy between the school and cadastral thombos to their socioeconomic advantage, as they realized that it played into Dutch fears of immorality.

Daniel's widow Gimara, however, had her own paper trail, including a *lascarin* deed in defense of her sons' inheritance, which she produced at the inquiry.⁶⁸ The existence of multiple forms of identification in this case, such as the school thombo, cadastral thombo, and *lascarin* deed, is evidence for the variety of options available for verification that competed for validity. Yet, it appears that the school thombo was considered the more truthful representation of this family relationship, supported by Jibika's testimony. The school thombo also reflected Daniel's lived experience, since he had probably lived with Jibika as a child.

⁶⁵ SLNA 1/7447A, "Mipe (Talpe) Thombo," 109. (1751)

⁶⁶ SLNA 1/6515, "Minutes GL," July 2, 1788, f. 167r.

⁶⁷ SLNA 1/1514, "Galle Political Council Minutes," October 29, 1789. Report by Landraad commissioners dated January 24, 1789.

⁶⁸ SLNA 1/6515, "Minutes GL," January 24, 1789, f. 197v.

After considering all the documentary evidence produced in the case, the council eventually decided on a compromise.⁶⁹ The service of *lascarin* would have to be performed by the husbands and descendants of Philippu's legitimate daughters as well as Daniel's children, who would all enjoy the lands belonging to that service in turns. The council also ordered that the cadastral thombo entry should carry a new note stating that Daniel was a nonmarital son of Philippu's sister-in-law, Manege Johange Jibika. This note was added on July 1, 1789, marking an altercation based on evidence from a school thombo.

Unfortunately, when Gimara appealed this decision to the higher courts, both she and Daniel's brothers-in-law lost all rights to the lands as well as the *lascarin* service. For these litigants, Dutch notions of illegitimacy and the various types of registration and paperwork introduced by the Dutch, worked both to their advantage and disadvantage. We see how the cadastral and school thombo were in conflict, and, at least in this case, also kept physically separate.

In other Landraad cases as well, the school thombos were used among many other forms of paperwork, mostly to claim or dispute inheritance.⁷⁰ Baptism also had to be verified through records in order to determine whether litigants and their witnesses were honest about being Christian, as part of a process of being allowed to take a Christian oath.⁷¹ Baptism was thus central to local understandings of a Christian identity. This shows the many ways in which religious registration such as the school thombo became rooted in society. The school thombos also continued to be used in genealogical claims well into the British period.⁷² All such uses of the school thombo suggest diverging perceptions of registration among the locals. Some avoided it, while others adapted to it within the Dutch colonial and religious system.

Conclusion

By moving away from the study of political and judicial administration in our analysis of the school thombo, we have argued that the lived experiences of everyday colonialism in Sri Lanka also occurred in the spaces of the family. As representations of colonial bureaucracy, the Dutch church intervened in family relations through registration and regulation of marriage, education, and religion.

The school thombos reflect "vital conjunctures" of the locals with the colonial church, facilitating the registration of milestones of family life. These conjunctures were recorded by schoolmasters, on request and during visitation day. The scribal power of the schoolmasters and the school thombo-keeper with the assistance of other village agents is evident; these information brokers

⁶⁹ Ibid., May 30, 1789, f. 229v.

⁷⁰ See for example SLNA 1/6512, February 20, 1779 f. 12v; SLNA 1/6513, September 27, 1780 f. 107r; SLNA 1/6514, January 6, 1781 f. 7v; SLNA 1/6515, January 24, 1789 f. 197v; SLNA 1/6517, November 1, 1794 f. 107r.

⁷¹ SLNA 1/6534, "Interrogations, Galle Landraad," August 18, 1781, f. 105v; Nadeera Rupesinghe, "Do You Know the Ninth Commandment: Tensions of the Oath in Dutch Colonial Sri Lanka," *Comparative Legal History* 7 (2019): 37–66.

⁷² SLNA 1/4048, "School thombo Rammukkana 2," 14.

were the linchpin in the paper regime of the school thombo. Though there are no extant instructions for the “micro-practices of writing” that were adopted in the registers, school thombos had the same template from Negombo to Matara. Comparison of the records provides insight into the dynamics and practices of school thombo registration, ranging from its particular order of entries to comments on migration.

The school thombo reached the heart of the family, revealing the many encounters with Dutch colonialism in coastal Sri Lanka. Because these records were a “living” register—they were edited and updated throughout the years—they uniquely show developments in family relations over generations and the mobility of families during this period. The school thombo, like the cadastral thombo, created a new relationship between family life and registration in local communities. Although the school thombos capture Sri Lankan families through the lens of the Dutch Reformed administration, they are a unique source of family and community relations for the eighteenth century. The records present women, children, communities, and families that have not left any other paper trail.

In the context of court cases, migration, mandatory labor, or access to appointments within the colonial system, the school thombos created a legal identity. This legal identity was a means of control for the VOC, but could also afford advantages to the local population. This required a bilateral recognition between the registered and registrars, and made the school thombo registration a site of negotiation, as it affected social mobility, legitimacy and inheritance.

While the school thombos are considered part of the parish registration, it is not only for the church that they are relevant. Such detail of families, social formations, life choices, and school education for a pre-1800 society is unprecedented. It is said in the literature on British India that the proclivity towards record-keeping under the British Raj is unsurpassed. In truth, the record-keeping practices of the Dutch in Sri Lanka are unsurpassed.

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