

Petitioning

the Dutch East India Company

Petitions as entries to the lived experience of Dutch colonialism around the uprising of 1790 in the Matara district, southern Sri Lanka



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Institute for History

Master thesis

Doreen van den Boogaart

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Supervisor: Dr. Alicia Schrikker
Second reader: Prof. dr. Jos Gommans
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Contact details: doreen.vdboogaart@live.nl
Student number: 1411756

Figure on cover: Cut-out of: Jan Brandes, Petitioners at the dessavony. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. NG-1985-7-1-10. Original caption: *These are the people waiting outside to see the dessava, those who have committed an offence, have come to submit a deed of sale, or have a request or some other business.*

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Foreword

As a student of colonial history, I keep questioning myself why and how I am interested in other cultures, mainly colonial societies. This Research Master thesis is, therefore, besides a celebration of finishing my education, also part of my search for ‘how to be interested?’, not with a colonial-structured mindset, but with a decolonising thought. One of the major directories to this thesis has been a recent interview with Ghassan Hage, Professor of Anthropology and Social Theory at the University of Melbourne, about decolonisation in relation to museums.¹ Hage notes that the concept of a ‘decolonised museum’ is usable if visitors leave the museum by having their colonial structure of thought disrupted. One of the most radical decolonial promises of the museum is, according to Hage, encouraging the visitors to ‘un-know’. This is a shift from a superior mode of ‘let me know you’ to ‘the relationship between the Other and the Self in an uneasy way.’ Working as a student assistant on the project of Prof. Nira Wickramasinghe and Dr. Alicia Schrikker ‘Being a slave: Indian Ocean slavery in local context’ and as an intern at the Rijksmuseum for the Slavery exhibition inspired me to use the framework of life stories for my thesis. An emphasis on persons gives the possibility to give slavery and – in my case – colonisation a ‘face’ and provides an Other that is not so different from the Self. I am thankful for everything I learned from the History team.

When my working period at the Rijksmuseum end, I was gifted the book *The World of Jan Brandes, 1743-1808, Drawings of a Dutch Traveller in Batavia, Ceylon and Southern Africa*. The exquisite water-colours of Jan Brandes occasionally pop up in my thesis and one of these is depicted on the cover. I wish to thank my dear friend and travel buddy Cynthia for designing the cover of my thesis and, of course, for travelling through beautiful Sri Lanka with me. My time in Sri Lanka has been the highlight of my thesis project, although the number of sources in the Sri Lanka National Archives sometimes overwhelmed me. I would like to thank Dinesh for his company at the archive, thinking along with me and showing me new lunch places. I am thankful to Prof. dr. Asoka de Zoysa, Dr. Nadeera Rupesinghe and Dr. Nirmal Dewasiri for making time in their busy schedules to discuss my research. The ladies of the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies have also been of great help, especially by scanning a book for me that was out of print. I am grateful to my host family who took me into their house and on fine trips. Furthermore, I thank the LUF Internationaal StudieFonds and the Minerva Scholarship Fund for subsidising this six-weeks trip to Sri Lanka.

In the Netherlands, Bente has been of great help during my preparation for my trip to Sri Lanka. I thank Dr. Albert van den Belt, Dr. Lodewijk Hovy and Dr. Lodewijk Wagenaar for both their thoughts and their books they shared with me. Furthermore, I should mention my supervisor Dr. Alicia Schrikker

¹ Ghassan Hage, Interview | Ghassan Hage, interview by Wayne Modest, 31 May 2018, <https://www.materialculture.nl/en/open-space/interview-ghassan-hage>.

who helped me greatly with her feedback and encouragement. I am very grateful to my dear family and friends who supported me, the persons who took the time to read through parts of my thesis, the ‘office’ people for their company, the ‘guppies’ for lunches, and of course Lasse for listening to all my complaints. Thanks to the encouragement of these amazing people and their willpower to keep up with me, I proudly present my thesis.

Glossary²

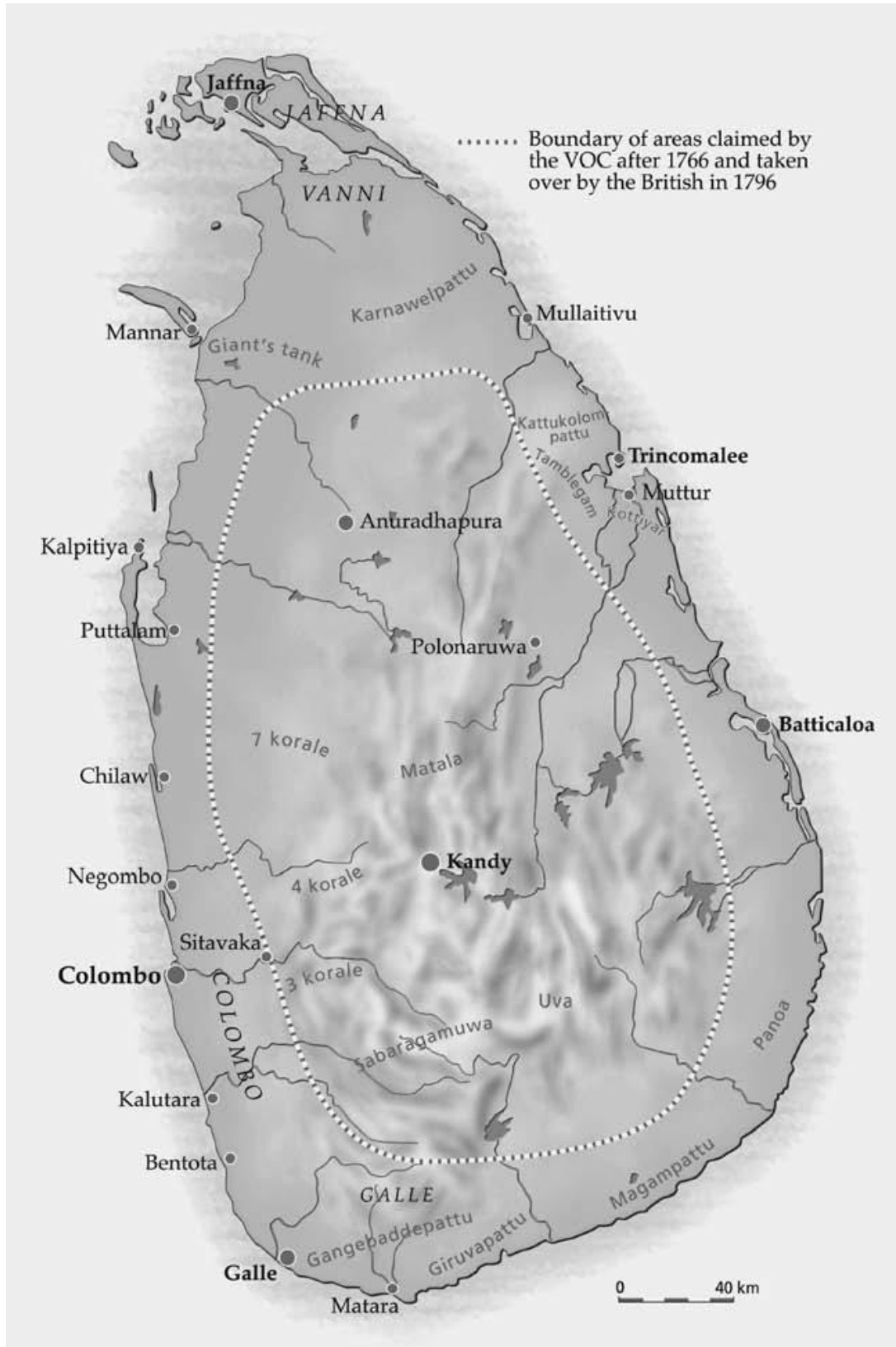
<i>accodomodessan</i>	Land granted to local officials in return for duties, services or offices.
Achari	Caste of smiths.
<i>adukku</i>	Cooked provisions supplied to officers or chief monks on tour. See also <i>pehindoos</i> .
<i>alut avurudda</i>	Sinhalese New Year. This holiday begins at the sighting of the new moon, around 13 or 14 April.
<i>ambalama (pl. ambalam)</i>	Small rest house located by the road, built for the convenience of long-distance travellers.
<i>amuna (pl. amunu)</i>	A measurement of sowing capacity.
<i>appuhamy (pl. appuhamu)</i>	An honourific that is usually given to an elite member of the Goyigama caste.
Arachchi	A minor village official. An arachchi could have a <i>randje</i> under him, containing twenty-four <i>lascorins</i> .
<i>atapattu</i>	Guard of higher functionaries.
<i>atapattu mandoe</i>	Residence of the Secretariat or guards of the <i>dessava</i> .
Badahāla	Caste of potters.
<i>baddecorn</i>	An official at the <i>porta</i> of the <i>dessava</i> , responsible for the collection of the paddy tax.
<i>Berava</i>	Caste of tom-tom beaters.
bitmeraal	The headman of the elephant-hunters.
<i>Chettys</i>	A merchant community of south Indian origin.
coolie	Minor member of the farmers' caste, among others <i>naindes</i> , obliged to perform manual labour.
<i>corle (korale)</i>	District containing of two or more <i>pattus</i> , beheaded by a <i>korala</i> .
<i>dessava</i>	The administrative head of a <i>dessavony</i> , European governor of a district in Dutch-controlled territory.
<i>dessavony</i>	A Sinhalese term for a province.
<i>Durava</i>	A caste, generally denoting toddy-tappers of the coconut palm.
<i>farezes</i>	(Portuguese) Name for low caste people, who carry parasols and palanquins.
Four Gravets	Inland sub-districts immediately outside the forts of the towns Colombo, Jaffna, Galle, and Matara.
<i>gerechtigheid</i>	That over which one exercises a right (tax).
Goyigama	Highest agricultural caste in the traditional caste hierarchy, also the numerically largest caste.
<i>Hakuru</i>	An agricultural caste; the name literally means 'those who make jaggery'.
heerlijkheid	(Dutch) Landed estate that served as the lowest administrative unit in rural areas, for example, the <i>heerlijkheid</i> around Weligama.
Heren Zeventien	(Dutch) "Gentlemen Seventeen", the board of directors of the VOC in the Netherlands.
<i>jaggery</i>	A variety of crystal sugar made from the sap of palm trees.

² For the glossary I made intensively use of the glossaries in the following books: Lodewijk Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek: Plakaten En Andere Wetten Uitgevaardigd Door Het Nederlands Bestuur Op Ceylon, 1638–1796*, vol. II (Hilversum: Verloren, 1991); Alicia Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815: Expansion and Reform* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant: Agrarian Society in Western Sri Lanka under Dutch Rule, 1740-1800* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008); Nadeera Seneviratne-Rupesinghe, 'Negotiating Custom, Colonial Lawmaking in the Galle Landraad' (Leiden, Leiden University, 2015).

<i>kæralikāra</i>	(Sinhalese) Rebel (කැරලිකාර).
<i>kangān</i>	Overseer.
<i>Karava</i>	A caste primarily of fishermen.
<i>koditoeak</i>	Heavy musket, also known as a jingal.
<i>korala</i>	Head of a corle.
<i>Landraad</i>	(Dutch) A civil court exercising jurisdiction over local inhabitants in matters relating to land, contracts, property, and debts.
<i>lascorin</i>	A locally-born soldier who also served as a messenger or guard.
<i>lijfgerechtigheid</i>	(Dutch) Body-tax (also known as angebadde). To the Salagama it was the amount of cinnamon they were ordered to peel according to their age, other minor castes paid lijfgerechtigheid in money.
<i>mahamudaliyar</i>	Highest native official serving the colonial government, advisor of the governor.
<i>maintementos</i>	Payment made in the form of money or provisions to performers of rajakariya.
<i>Malabars</i>	European denomination of Tamils.
<i>malapalu</i>	Lands escheated by the death of their tenants.
<i>mandate-ola</i>	Memorandum. Regulation and instruction, written in Sinhala and/or Tamil to local headmen and inhabitants in Dutch-controlled territory.
<i>mandoe</i>	Residence, often not more than a shed.
<i>mayoral</i>	Village head who traditionally organised the compulsory service of rājakāriya.
<i>medida</i>	Square measure.
<i>mokkedon</i>	Overseer of the public works, slave overseer.
<i>Moor</i>	Muslims of South India and Sri Lanka.
<i>mudaliyar</i>	The highest rank of indigenous chiefs under the Dutch.
<i>muhandiram</i>	An indigenous chief below the rank of mudaliyār.
<i>nainde</i>	Minor member of the farmers' caste, obliged to perform manual labour.
<i>ola</i>	Palm-leaves made for writing, also used for paving the roof.
<i>otu</i>	A tax of one-tenth of the produce.
<i>Padu</i>	A caste with low ritual status whose members usually performed menial services, mostly as coolies.
<i>paraveni</i>	Ancestral/inherited lands.
<i>paresse</i>	Ceremony when the local inhabitants paid obeisance to their overlord, with gifts
<i>parra</i>	Measure for grain.
<i>pattu</i>	An administrative division within a corle.
<i>pehindoes</i>	Cooked provisions supplied to officers or chief monks on tour. See also adukkus
<i>pingo</i>	Two baskets hung at either end of a pole and carried on the shoulder. Also, a porter's load of goods offered as a due.
<i>plakkaat</i>	(Dutch) Proclamation with legal force issued by the Dutch colonial Government.
<i>Porowākaraya</i>	Originally woodcutters, there is no unambiguous ascription of these people.
<i>Porta</i>	Court, local staff of the Governor, commander, dessava or chief headmen.
<i>Rada</i>	Caste of washers.
<i>rajakariya</i>	Literally, the duty to the king/lord of the land. Unpaid labour of the peasants recruited by the chiefs and rulers.
<i>randje</i>	Department of twenty-four lascorins.
<i>resident</i>	European official of an area in Dutch-controlled territory, below the dessava.
<i>sabandaar</i>	A native revenue official of a district.

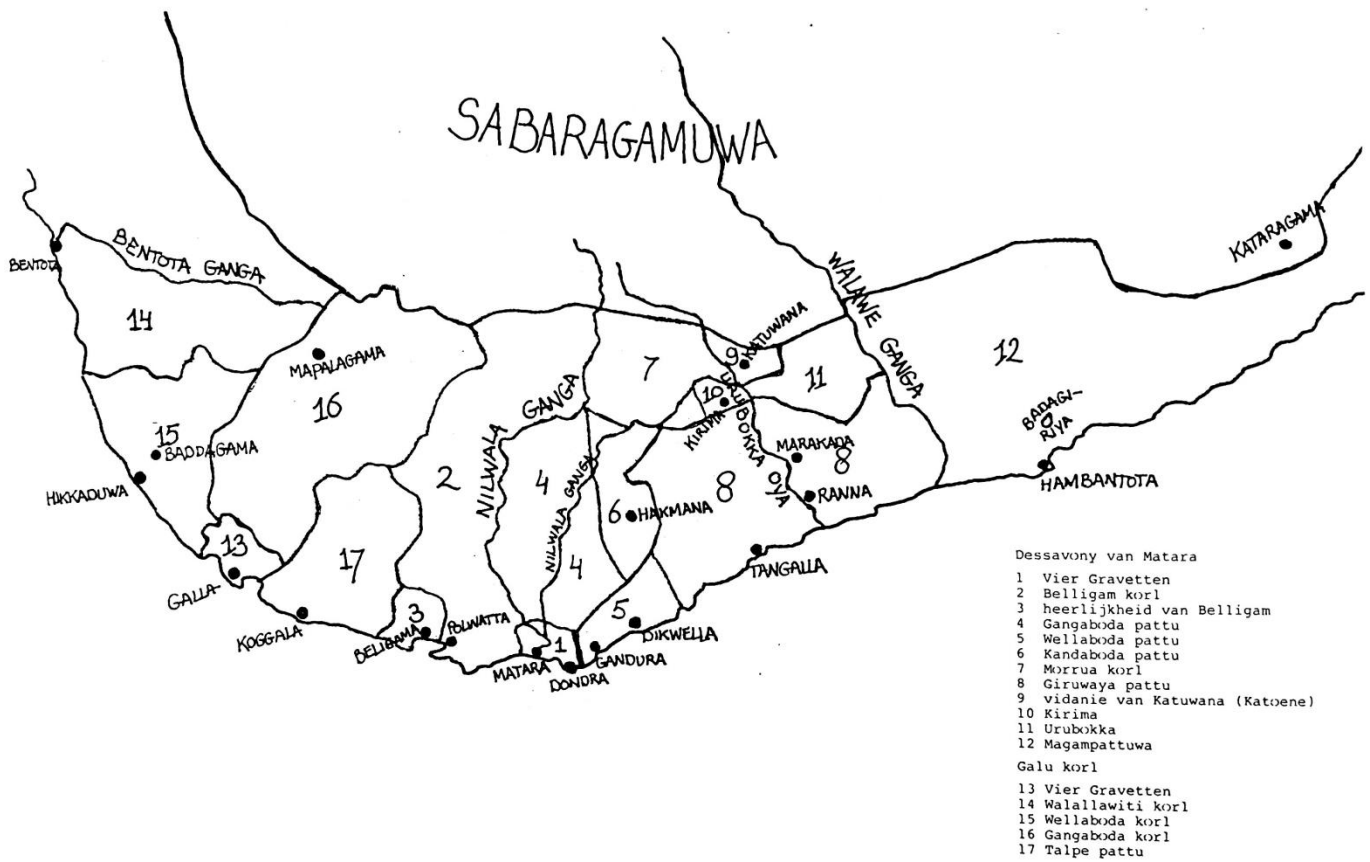
<i>Salagama</i>	Caste of cinnamon peelers.
<i>thombo-keeper</i>	A European official occupied with the (re)production of the thombo.
<i>thombo</i>	(Portuguese) A register of land and families, including details on the area, produce, ownership and income.
<i>toni</i>	Small boat, often made out of one tree trunk.
<i>vidane</i>	A minor indigenous chief. Also, a minor administrative division.
<i>vidane arachchi</i>	Village official.
<i>vidane muhandiram</i>	(Minor) village official.
<i>wahatje</i>	Minor member of the farmers' caste doing the same kind of work as the naindes, therefore obliged to perform manual labour.

Maps



Map 1: Map of Sri Lanka (1780-1815), Armand Haye, Amsterdam. (Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka*, vxi)

HET GEBIED VAN DE OPSTAND (1790)



Map 2: The area of the uprising (1790), Matarara dessavony and Galle corle. (Belt, 'Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794', 54)

Introduction

On 12 October 2015, NewsFirst, a Sri Lankan news organisation, reported about the tense situation during a protest in the Badagiriya area in southern Sri Lanka. The protesters obstructed the Kataragama-Colombo main road while alleging that the water supplied by the Badagiriya Water Supply Scheme was unsuitable for consumption. The police arrested a couple of violent protesters. After an investigation, the magistrate of the Hambantota district stated that the situation arose over the failure of relevant authorities to provide a solution to the water issue and released the suspects on bail.³ 225 years earlier, the inhabitants of the Matara district refused obligatory labour at a project of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Badagiriya. People had died while working on the water reservoir there, because of the dangers of the jungle and the unhealthy drinking water. Protesting started in April 1790, the month of the *aluth avurudda*, the Sinhalese New Year. It was exactly during this season that tenants paid obeisance to landlords, little headmen to big headmen, and chieftains to the king.⁴ In the spring of 1790, the inhabitants of the Matara *dessavony* were everything but obedient. Their protest spread through the countryside and colonial officials received petitions on the exploitation, oppressive laws, and taxes. The great value of those petitions is that they can reveal perspectives that are radically different from that of the Company administrators as well as the social world of the inhabitants of the coastal provinces of Sri Lanka.

Peasant-cultivators, the majority of Sri Lanka's inhabitants, found themselves in between Dutch and local officials. The Dutch brought local headmen in the coastal provinces wealth and new positions. So, the Company hoped to sustain its power in Sri Lanka. From 1638 onwards, the VOC started with its mission to get a hold on the cinnamon trade by overthrowing the Portuguese presence on the island. After twenty years the VOC expelled the Portuguese Estado da Índia from the island with the support of the inland-located Kandyan kingdom. The Company gained the monopoly on cinnamon but did not give back Portuguese occupations to the Kandyan king, against what was agreed upon before.⁵ Every year around the Sinhalese New Year, the Company sent an embassy to the king of Kandy. From the Kandyan viewpoint to express the allegiance of a subordinate ruler. It gave the VOC the possibility to obtain permission for cinnamon peelers to go into the Kandyan forests. In the last decades of the eighteenth century, the power of the Kandyan king was narrowed down. This was after the Kandyan-Dutch war of 1762-1766, the treaty of 1766 – which intended to end the Dutch position as a vassal of

³ 'Tense Situation during Badagiriya Protest; Arrested Suspects Released on Bail - Sri Lanka Latest News', Sri Lanka News - Newsfirst, 12 October 2015, <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2015/10/12/tense-situation-during-badagiriya-protest-arrested-suspects-released-on-bail/>.

⁴ Michael Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period, 1590s to 1815* (Colombo: Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2004), 81.

⁵ Seneviratne-Rupasinghe, 'Negotiating Custom, Colonial Lawmaking in the Galle Landraad', 65; Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815*, 22.

the Kandyan king – and the occupation of some Kandyan land.⁶ The Dutch East India Company had gradually turned into a colonial power in Sri Lanka.

In this study, I examine forty-four petitions from people in the Matara district, transmitted to colonial officials in the first three months of the uprising and other testimonies. The question I aim to answer is: “How do petitions written during a protest in 1790 convey the resistance, negotiation, and experience of Dutch colonialism by inhabitants of the Matara dessorony?” On the basis of this research, the value of petitions as an entity to get insight into the condition of colonised humanity is analysed as well. Not to search for evidence of that humanity, but, as Walter Johnson urges, rather to think about the life existence of colonised people, the ways they suffered in and resisted colonialism, and the ways they flourished in their colonised position.⁷ The following sub-questions will be asked to develop a view of the lived experience of Dutch colonialism, (1) In what context entered the forty-four petitions the VOC archives? (2) Why and how did the protesters switch to petitioning? (3) Which rhetorical devices are used in the petitions? (4) What do the petitions tell us about the inland population’s daily life?

This research contributes to four different fields of academic research. As a historical study of the lived experience of colonialism through petitions, it fits both into the field of decentring history,⁸ and the upcoming field of petitioning as a political and legal practice in South Asia and beyond.⁹ The postcolonial, archival turn is still in an early state in VOC historiography.¹⁰ Colonial petitions are little-studied archival sources that can retrieve data on the social world of subaltern¹¹ people. Thus, the focus on solely petitions is innovative in VOC historiography and in the history of the VOC in Sri Lanka.¹² Most importantly, our knowledge of the lives of these people in the interior of the Matara district gets

⁶ Lodewijk Wagenaar, *Galle, VOC-Vestiging in Ceylon. Beschrijving van Een Koloniale Samenleving Aan de Vooravond van de Singalese Opstand Tegen Het Nederlandse Gezag, 1760* (Amsterdam: De Bataafsche Leeuw, 1994), 25; Kumari Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment: Popular Revolts in Sri Lanka in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Colombo: Social Scientists’ Association, 2010), 62.

⁷ Walter Johnson, ‘On Agency’, *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 115. Walter Johnson writes about enslavement, but I took the liberty to extend it to colonialism in general. He warns scholars to take distance from the idea of ‘giving the slaves back their agency’, scholars should not present their research as a discovery of the agency and humanity of the enslaved, but, on the contrary, as a way to understand the being and becoming of a colonised person.

⁸ Decentring history studies working people, other non-elite populations, and women specifically. A decentring historian moves her/his focus beyond Europe and the West. See for example: Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World’, *History and Theory* 50, no. 2 (2011): 188–202.

⁹ See for the latest articles on petitioning in South Asia the special issue “Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia” of *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1.

¹⁰ Alicia Schrikker, ‘Rethinking the VOC: Between Archival Management and Research Practice. Introduction’, *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 2, no. 134 (2019): 97; Ann Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance’, *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (2002): 87–109.

¹¹ I understand subaltern as a term for people considered to be at the lowest level of the social hierarchy. Writing on subalternity are, among others, the influential Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, by Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams (New York, Sydney: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 66–111; Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹² See for research of petitions from the (beginning of the) British Period: Nira Wickramasinghe, ‘Many Little Revolts or One Rebellion? The Maritime Provinces of Ceylon/Sri Lanka between 1796 and 1800’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 32, no. 2 (2009): 170–88.

enriched by foregrounding the voices and experiences of peasant-cultivators. Therefore, this thesis is yet another step towards the decolonisation of the archive as it contains stories about the “being” of colonised people.

Postcolonial historians have been turning history upside down for decades now, by conveying the voice of subaltern people who were ‘reacting to Europeans, suffering, resisting, exchanging knowledge and objects, sometimes intimate with Europeans, often ignoring them and going on with their lives.’¹³ This is part of what Nathalie Zemon Davis calls decentering history; writing history, not from the vantage point of powerful elites, governors, soldiers, settlers, and missionaries, but the history of colonised persons themselves. I take Davis’ statement to heart as she writes, ‘even when describing all the parties, the decentering historian may let the subalterns and their practices and beliefs carry the narrative’¹⁴ Colonial records show glimpses of subaltern agency and resistance, Clare Anderson convincingly shows in her monograph *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920*. Piecing together the available fragments of the lives of subaltern people can open up ‘new perspectives on the complexities of colonialism.’¹⁵ The current study brings together the approach to piece together the histories of lives and morals of subaltern people by the available archival sources and reading petitions as voicing engagement and negotiation with state practice by the Matara dessavony’s inhabitants.

At the beginning of this century petitioning in the colonial-era became a more prominent research topic in South Asian studies. Although by no means a new practice, writing petitions became an essential mode of political address in many colonial contexts. However, the existing historical work largely emphasizes the legitimizing role petitions had for the power of centralized states. An exception is Michael Adas, as he calls, already in 1981, petitioning a middle ground between the passive and revolutionary responses of the peasant to scale back the demands of the state and elite groups and thereby retaining enough of what they produce to build decent lives for themselves.¹⁶ The special issue of *Modern Asian Studies* ‘Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia’, published at the beginning of 2019, stimulates reading petitions for the consciousness of the writers while acknowledging that the petitions were still products of colonial rule.¹⁷ The authors in the volume emphasize ‘the disciplinary or pedagogical role of petitioning regimes and how the written forms of petitions were mediated by official

¹³ Davis, ‘Decentering History’, 190.

¹⁴ Davis, 190.

¹⁵ Anderson, *Subaltern Lives*.

¹⁶ Michael Adas, ‘Comment’, in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 127.

¹⁷ Aparna Balachandran, ‘Petitions, the City, and the Early Colonial State in South India’, *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (2019): 152; Rohit De and Robert Travers, ‘Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia: Introduction’, *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (2019): 3, 4, 14.

and non-official structures of power, [and] (...) also point to the role of petitions as adaptive expressions of community and individual rights, and as vehicles of political dissent and popular mobilization.’¹⁸ Aparna Balachandran, Bhavani Raman, and Prashant Kidambi introduce in their articles numerous examples of collective petitions from colonial India that intertwined an idealised past and administrative precedents. This strengthened the petitioners’ claims. Ideas on equity and legitimacy of the colonial ruler proved the truth of the narratives of past practice.¹⁹ Petitions evoke not (only) passivity or silent subversion, but, in John Chalcraft’s words, ‘surprisingly, sophisticated *engagement and negotiation* with state practice and discourse.’²⁰

Even though the forty-four petitions contain the voice of the inhabitants of the Matara district, petitions cannot be seen as representative of the unfiltered consciousness of the colonial legal subject. In her influential essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reflects on the impossibility of the ‘true’ subaltern group to speak for themselves. To understand the consciousness of this oppressed minority we must recognise the significance of their silence and let the silence speak for them, instead of speaking on their behalf.²¹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot states in this regard that sources and archives are never neutral; they are always telling a story of power and silence histories and people. Besides that, the documents the VOC created and assembled on the lives of the inhabitants of Sri Lanka are rarely as detailed as the historian wishes. In the end, the archive is the immediate result of the interests and policies of the colonial state.²² Subsequently, Ann Stoler advocates for understanding the coloniser first, before looking at the colonised. Reading only ‘against the grain’ by writing histories of resistance that might locate human agency bypasses the texture and granularity of the archive. By reading the colonial archive ‘along the grain’ the power in the production of the archive itself becomes central.²³ The VOC officials and the documents the colonial state produced will therefore not be absent in this thesis. Responding to the archival turn, Remco Raben notes that recognising colonial reasoning is already enough: Analysing the colonial mindset does not offer alternative viewpoints on the dynamics of colonial society. Historians, he argues, should look ‘beyond the archival grain’ and not overestimate the sense of control and regulation that these records breathe.²⁴

¹⁸ De and Travers, ‘Petitioning and Political Cultures in South Asia: Introduction’, 4.

¹⁹ Balachandran, ‘Petitions, the City, and the Early Colonial State in South India’; Bhavani Raman, ‘Civil Address and the Early Colonial Petition in Madras’, *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (2019): 123–149; Prashant Kidambi, ‘The Petition as Event: Colonial Bombay, circa 1889–1914’, *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (2019): 203–39.

²⁰ John Chalcraft, ‘Engaging the State: Peasants and Petitions in Egypt on the Eve of Colonial Rule’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 37, no. 3 (2005): 304. My italics.

²¹ Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’

²² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995), xii, 48.

²³ Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance’, 87, 100.

²⁴ Schrikker, ‘Rethinking the VOC: Between Archival Management and Research Practice. Introduction’, 100; Remco Raben, ‘Ethnic Disorder in VOC Asia. A Plea for Eccentric Reading’, *BMGN - Low Countries Historical Review* 134, no. 2 (2019): 116–17.

Like Remco Raben chooses the Chinese revolt in early October 1740 to explore testimonies of people involved, Nira Wickramasinghe foregrounds the voices of the participants of uprisings in British Sri Lanka. Wickramasinghe borrows a phrase from Marina Carter as she writes that ‘the voice of the colonised’ in Sri Lanka ‘reaches us only at certain flashpoints of history: emerging from a moment of crisis, an enquiry, or out of an effort, individual or collective often born of desperation.’²⁵ In her article ‘Many Little Revolts or One Rebellion? The Maritime Provinces of Ceylon/Sri Lanka between 1796 and 1800’ Wickramasinghe reads the late eighteenth century through the eyes of the inhabitants of the island. The content of petitions and other testimonies challenges contemporary accounts of officials on which conventional historians based their writings on the ‘rebellion’ of at the beginning of the British colonial period in Sri Lanka.²⁶ Some years earlier a similar crisis took place in Matara, the petitions that arose from this event make it possible to search for the material context and the reasons for the uprising, conveyed by local witnesses and participants.

The four hundred and fifty years of colonial occupation in Sri Lanka are, in Kumari Jayawardena's words, ‘marked by confrontation and various forms of resistance to foreign rule.’²⁷ Jayawardena’s comprehensive overview in *Perpetual Ferment: Popular Revolts in Sri Lanka in the 18th and 19th Centuries* compiles many revolts against the colonial occupiers and their agents to fill the gap in the historiography on peasant revolts in the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century.²⁸ While Jayawardena focuses on the insurgents’ consciousness, Lodewijk Wagenaar investigates only the policy of the VOC towards disturbances and revolts. Although uprisings in the rice-producing Matara district between 1757 and 1766 are central in his dissertation, the reasoning and testimonies of the insurgents themselves are absent.²⁹ In a recent book chapter, Wagenaar writes on the journey of investigator Abraham Samlant into the countryside in 1757. Only occasionally Wagenaar incorporates data from transmitted petitions, but the protesters, their practices and beliefs still do not carry the narrative.³⁰ Thus, without a bottom-up approach, as I adopt in this study, these people stay at the margins of history.

²⁵ Wickramasinghe cites: Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1996), 4.

²⁶ Wickramasinghe, ‘Many Little Revolts or One Rebellion?’, 171–72, 176. Wickramasinghe cites: Marina Carter, *Voices from Indenture. Experiences of Indian Migrants in the British Empire* (London and New York: Leicester University Press, 1996), 4.

²⁷ Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment*, 1.

²⁸ Jayawardena, 133–39.

²⁹ Wagenaar, *Galle, VOC-Vestiging in Ceylon.*; Lodewijk Wagenaar, “‘Vreemde Ogen Dwingen Niet’”. Abraham Samlant Op Rondreis in de Ceylonese Dessavonie van Matara, 1757’, in *Aan de Overkant. Ontmoetingen in Dienst van de VOC En WIC (1600-1800)*, ed. Lodewijk Wagenaar (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2015), 117–43.

³⁰ Wagenaar, ‘Vreemde Ogen Dwingen Niet’.

In her book, Jayawardena marks the Kandyan-Dutch war of 1762-1766 as the last popular protest during the Dutch period.³¹ There has been a general neglect of the late eighteenth century in the historiography of Sri Lanka, but before the publication of Jayawardena's book, Alicia Schrikker, as one of the first historians, already drew attention to the transition period between the Dutch and British periods as well as troubles in the countryside.³² In her dissertation *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815* Schrikker briefly mentions the 1790 uprising with the inhabitants of the countryside as its main actors.³³ The current thesis builds on the work of Schrikker and adds another protest to Jayawardena's account on popular revolts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Sri Lanka.

For the second half of the eighteenth century, both Nirmal Dewasiri and Nadeera Rupesinghe have been searching in the last decades for documental traces of the encounter between the Dutch East India Company and the historical actors in the local scene. Dewasiri investigates in *The Adaptable Peasant Agrarian Society in Western Sri Lanka under Dutch Rule, 1740-1800* how the peasant-cultivators and the local chiefs responded to the Dutch intervention and the significant changes they underwent as they adapted to change. The region he focusses on is the district around Colombo, the governmental centre. His chief sources are *thombos*; these land registers, compiled by people working for the VOC, provide basic facts about the social and economic life of coastal Sri Lanka's inhabitants.³⁴ Next to this, Rupesinghe analyses in *Negotiating Custom: Colonial Lawmaking in the Galle Landraad* 'how ordinary people experienced colonial rule in practice through the language of the law.'³⁵ She uses sources of the *Landraad* of Galle, the judicial body that mainly solved disputes between the local population or natives and Europeans about property, inheritance disputes and land ownership. Inspired by Dewasiri and Rupesinghe, I investigate yet another archival source voicing people who have often been silenced; the colonial petition. In this study, we travel to the deep south of Sri Lanka, the Matara district. (Map 1)

Although unpublished, Albert van den Belt's doctorate thesis in 1989 on the years of Governor Willem Jacob van de Graaff's governing period (1784-1796) is worth noting. Van den Belt sees the uprising in Matara in 1790 as one of the two main events of Van de Graaff's governing period.³⁶ My approach is innovative as Van den Belt only touches briefly on the main sources of this thesis, forty-four petitions. After a short analysis, he concludes that the bulk of the petitions are about 'the situation of a colonial, patriarchal and feudal society, the [petitions] are, as it were, timeless and would only lead in a very special occasion to a long-term rebellion.'³⁷ Even though Van den Belt declares that he does

³¹ Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment*, 62.

³² Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815*, 1-6.

³³ Schrikker, 79-80.

³⁴ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*.

³⁵ Seneviratne-Rupesinghe, 'Negotiating Custom, Colonial Lawmaking in the Galle Landraad', 1.

³⁶ The other event is the expeditions Governor Van de Graaff led against Kandy in 1791 and 1792.

³⁷ "Heeft te maken met de situatie van een koloniale, patriarchale en feodale samenleving: zij zijn in zekere zin tijdloos en zullen pas in zeer bijzondere omstandigheden tot een langdurig opstand aanleiding geven." Albert van

not want to dismiss the experiences of inhabitants of the Matara district, he actually does by turning his attention quickly to the elite. According to Van den Belt, prominent headmen initiated the revolt and the peasant-cultivators humbly followed their leaders.³⁸

For insight into peasant revolts, I wish to go back to Ranajit Guha's masterful demonstration of the elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial contexts. Presenting peasant insurrections as purely spontaneous and unpremeditated as mythic as the primary sources of historical evidence do not suggest anything in that direction. 'To rebel was [...] to destroy many of [the] familiar signs which he had learned to read and manipulate in order to extract meaning out of the harsh world around him and live with it.'³⁹ Peasants had a lot to lose when they rose into revolt, so taking the risk of turning everything upside down was not something a peasant would do in a state of absent-mindedness.⁴⁰ I argue that we only move towards an understanding of these peasants' contributions, consciousness and life existence in 1790 as we keep focussing on the testimonies of southern Sri Lankan peasants.

The main sources of this thesis, a little-studied group of forty-four petitions, are hidden within the proceedings of the meetings of investigators of the uprising Dietrich Thomas Fretz and Abraham Samlant in May and June 1790.⁴¹ The documented petitions are translated into Dutch, by translators, often Sinhalese with often Christianized names. All petitions are presumably written in Sinhala, as many

den Belt, 'Introductie Op "Memorie Overgegeven Aan Den ...Heer Joan Gerard van Angelbeek ... Aankomende Gouverneur En Directeur van Ceilon ... Door Den Gouverneur En Geëligeerd Dierecteur-Generaal Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794"' (Amsterdam, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1989), 68.

³⁸ Belt, 51–52, 68.

³⁹ Ranajit Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 45.

⁴⁰ Guha, 45.

⁴¹ At least four copies of the petitions still remain in the archives. In the Sri Lanka National Archives in Colombo one copy is found in the archives of the Dutch Central Government of Coastal Ceylon and, since the archives of the Dutch government in the divisions of Galle and Matara were brought to the office of Colonial Secretariat at Colombo by the British, the original notes from the meetings in which the petitions were discussed and the translations were copied are now also to be found in Colombo. In the Netherlands, parts of the archives of the *Hoge Regering* in Batavia are stored in the National Archive in The Hague. There we also find the archive of the VOC with the *Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren*. The petitions are found in the following archives: SLNA, 1/2908, Proceedings of the meetings of the commissioners Dietrich Thomas Fretz and Abraham Samlant, who were appointed by the Governor in Council to investigate into the revolts in the Matara dessavony, and their memorandum addressed to the inhabitants on 1790 May 28, SLNA, 1/2914, The record of the proceedings of the commissioners Fretz and Samlant (same as no. 2908, but without the memorandum addressed to the inhabitants) and the annexes to the proceedings (same as the annexes to the report in no. 2911), NA (NL), HR 595, Notes of the meetings of the commissioners from the Ceylonese government D.F. Fretz and A. Samlant with Mr. C. van Angelbeek, head merchant of Galle and dessava of the Matara area about the complaints of the inhabitants of the dessavony on Van Angelbeek, NA (NL), HR 3883, f. 1604 – 1806, Notes of the meetings of the commissioners Dietrich Thomas Fretz and Abraham Samlant and the dessava from 4 May 1790 until 14 June 1790 of their commission together with some translations of complaint-olas.

have the caption ‘a Sinhalese *complaint-ola*’. A number of petitions are signed, some by only one person, but one of the collective petitions was signed by even 260 people! The signatures were either in Sinhalese handwriting or with *Nederduits* names. In a couple of petitions, it is noted down that the ones signing the petition represented a much larger number of people. From the archival sources, it does not become clear who wrote the petitions. It seems that the *olas*, palm-leaves made for writing, handed over to the investigators were written down in a short amount of time, so probably there were scribes or other literate people among the protesters.

Following upon the delivery, translation, and discussion of the 1790 petitions, Samlant and Fretz wrote a *mandate-ola* to satisfy the inhabitants. However, the protesters did not agree with everything on this list of actions and kept protesting. It was the commander of Galle, Pieter Sluijsken, who took the final decisions in July. Sluijsken also responded to new petitions. (Appendix I provides a timeline of the different investigation committees) Contrary to the documentation by Samlant and Fretz, only summaries are left from the petitions Sluijsken received.⁴² The content of all petitions is remarkable as it shows the interaction between VOC officials and inhabitants and the influence of the *dessavony*’s inhabitants on the policy of the VOC. The Company officials in Matara and Galle, where the commandment of the area was situated, updated the governor and the council of Sri Lanka in Colombo on the revolts and the steps taken to bring back order in the Maritime Provinces.⁴³ This documentation supplements the petitions, but not with the intention to drown out the testimonies.

The thesis is in two parts. The first gives an introduction to Matara and the protest in 1790. The course of the protest is drawn up in the first chapter. Moments and mechanisms of fact creation and fact assemblies will be examined. In the second chapter, the petition as a village defence mechanism and the transformative agency of the people’s collective resistance are central. I also question Jayawardena’s statement that every popular protest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a ‘united front’ against perceived injustice.⁴⁴ Although the first part briefly touches upon the petitioners and switching to petition, the second part of this study discusses the petitions in dept. In Chapter Three, the attention moves from using the body as a tool of resistance to petitions as negotiation tools. I expand on the

⁴² SLNA, 1/2912, 17 June 1790, Notes of the Political meeting in Matara and decisions by commander Peter Sluijsken on the action taken by D.T. Fretz and A. Samlant during their commission mentioned in no. 2908, f. 33-61.

⁴³ The investigators sent copies of their notes and translations of the petitions from Matara to the Dutch government in Colombo. The correspondence is inventorized by Mr. Mottau in the inventory of the Dutch government in the divisions of Galle (Matara) and Jaffnapatnam 1640-1796 in the SLNA under the title documents or papers on the “Matara Rebellion”. Copies were also sent from Colombo to the *Hoge Regering* in Batavia and are also to be found in the *Overgekomen Brieven en Papieren*, letters and documents from the VOC establishments sent to the *Heeren XVII*, the governmental body in the Netherlands. These archives are now (partly) stored in the Dutch National Archives in The Hague.

⁴⁴ Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment*, 142.

rhetoric the petitioners adopted and the reasons they adduced for their dissatisfaction. Chapter Four looks at the petitions as entry into (parts) of the daily lives of the people governed by colonial rulers. In the concluding observation, I will, besides answering the research question, reflect on the value of petitions as entries into the life existence of colonised people, in Sri Lanka and in a global context. In addition, I give suggestions for possible further research on the condition of colonised humanity based on petitions.

Chapter One: Traces in the archive

That is why I [Sluijsken] started thinking that the headmen were part of the uprising and [even] used their influence and power to initiate it, (...) but keeping in mind that the dessava Van Angelbeek was very satisfied with these headmen, and as it seems that they respect the noble Van Angelbeek, I assume that the possibility exists that the court of Kandy provoked the uprising, as has happened in former years, to take the opportunity to revive the old claims on the coasts of Ceylon, and if possible take control [of the coasts].⁴⁵

In August 1790, commander of Galle, Pieter Sluijsken, shared the abovementioned thoughts on the perpetual unrest with Governor Van de Graaff. Although the VOC and the Kandyan king signed a peace treaty in 1766, the rulers Kirti Sri Rajasinha (1747-1782) and Sri Rajadhi Rajasinha (1782-1798) made claims on the coasts of the island constantly. Therefore, Sluijsken presumed that this could be the case this particular time as well. In his report, the people actually participating in the uprising nearly stayed unmentioned. This is all the more surprising as many peasants-cultivators declared their motivation in petitions they handed over to Dutch investigators. The protest was against the wrongs done to them. So, the initial reasons for the agrarian population to join the uprising and the subject of their grievances were mostly silenced in the historical sources. In this chapter, I want to show how, why and in which context the petitions entered the VOC archives by focusing on the hypothetical moments and mechanisms of fact creation and fact assembly in the making of sources and archives. According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, ‘inequalities experienced by the actors lead to uneven historical power in the inscription of traces. Sources built upon these traces, in turn, privilege some events over others, not always the ones privileged by the actors.’⁴⁶

Thus, even when sources contain voices or traces of subaltern peoples’ lives, these sources were still produced in a colonial structure. In the end, it remains true what Martin Klein notifies: ‘The documents we read were not written for us. They were written for other administrators.’⁴⁷ This chapter deals with the form of the colonial archives, the process of the making of these archives and the rationality – or the lack of it. In this regard, Ann Stoler states that archival production is a powerful

⁴⁵ SLNA, 1/755, 12 August 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon, ‘Daarom kwam ik ook de spoedig op de gedagten dat de hoofden aan deese zaamenrotting deel moesten hebben en door haaren invloed en vermoogen bewerkt hadden (...) in over[weging] neemende, dat de heer dessave van Angelbeeck met alle diese hoofden zo ingenoomen was, en het scheen dat zij zijn E[dele] ook bevindig en hoog achtig, zo veronderstelde ik dat het moogelijk het hoff van Kandia gelijk wel in voorrige jaaren, deesen op stand zoude hebben kunnen verwekken, om bij een diergelijke gelegenheid desselfs al oude eijschen op der stranden van Ceilon weder levendig te maaken, en waar het moogelijk is beheersching te krijgen.’

⁴⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 48.

⁴⁷ Martin A. Klein, ‘Looking for Slavery in Colonial Archives: French West Africa’, in *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade: Volume 2, Essays on Sources and Methods*, ed. Alice Bellagamba, Sandra E. Greene, and Martin A. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 114.

technology of the colonial states. Colonial states were ‘information-hungry machines in which power accrued from the massive accumulation of ever-more knowledge rather than from the quality of it.’⁴⁸ Firstly, this chapter places the Matara dessavony, the place where the protest and petition originated, in the spotlight. Secondly, I describe the uprising of 1790 and analyse the appeals of the Dutch colonial official to switch to petitioning. Finally, the denial of the peasants’ consciousness in both the archival sources and the historiography is analysed.

1.1 *The Matara dessavony, a district in colonial Sri Lanka*

Broadly defined, colonial Sri Lanka can be subdivided into the interior formation, the coastal formation, and the *Four Gravets* formation. The majority of the Sri Lankan population under colonial rule lived in the interior area. The agricultural castes (*Goyigama*, *Padu*, and *Hakuru*), manufacturing castes (*Achari* (smiths) and *Badahäla* (pottery-makers)) and service castes (*Rada* (washers) and *Berava* (charmners and devil dancers)) lived in the interior. Next to this specific labour, these castes were engaged in tilling the soil, as caste-based occupations did not fulfil the sources of livelihood.⁴⁹ Besides this, the inhabitants were obliged to render specific taxes and corvee labour duties to the VOC. Traditionally, the duty was performed for the lord of the land (*rajakariya*). However, now the Dutch extracted surplus of the peasant in the form of ground rent and unpaid-labour.⁵⁰ Obligatory labour depended on status as landowners, labourers and the membership of castes or communities.⁵¹ Services concerted road repair, irrigation, and building projects, as well as work on dams and lands, like in the Magampattu in 1790.⁵² (Map 2)

While the interior formation concentrated on peasant agriculture, the coastal formation focussed on fishing, toddy-tapping, carpentry, and other economic activities.⁵³ Europeans, *Moors*, *Chettys*, *Malabars*, and ex-slaves lived around the Forts of Colombo, Galle, and Matara in the Four Gravets areas. Trading communities like *Moors* and *Chettys* also resided in the coastal areas. Coastal castes included the *Karava* (fishermen), *Durava* (toddy-tappers) and *Salagama* (cinnamon peelers). The *Salagama* were obliged to peel cinnamon. Their work was crucial to the VOC, as cinnamon was the most important economic reason the Dutch occupied the coasts of Sri Lanka.⁵⁴ Cinnamon was often collected in the wild, but from the 1780s the cinnamon plantations ascended in the Dutch-occupied areas.⁵⁵ Cinnamon peelers had to work eight months a year. As they were not able to cultivate enough

⁴⁸ Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance’, 100.

⁴⁹ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 34, 203–8.

⁵⁰ Dewasiri, 5.

⁵¹ Matthias van Rossum, ‘Coolie Transformations – Uncovering the Changing Meaning and Labour Relations of Coolie Labour in the Dutch Empire (18th and 19th Century)’, in *Bonded Labour: Global and Comparative Perspectives (18th-21st Century)*, ed. Sabine Damir-Geilsdorf, et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016), 91.

⁵² Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815*, 17.

⁵³ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 34, 203, 207.

⁵⁴ Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment*, 29–30, 48.

⁵⁵ Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815*, 54, 55.

rice on their paddy fields for themselves, they were allowed to sail to Matara. The Matara district was an important region for rice production.⁵⁶

In the interior, people resided in small settlements ‘completely separated from each other and surrounded mostly by thick, tropical jungles.’⁵⁷ Their main activities included cultivating paddy-fields. Arable land was created in the slash-and-burn jungles (*chenas*) where various vegetables and other staple-goods were grown. Trees in gardens that surrounded the houses of the peasants supplied them with sustenance for daily life. The paddy-field was important as it provided with rice.⁵⁸ Most day-to-day needs were supplied from within the hamlets. The call for *rajakariya* changed the slow rhythm of the peasant life. Some male members of the family had to leave their houses for a specific time of the year, others gave part of the harvest of their lands to the ruler as tax.⁵⁹

During the nine years of Van de Graaff’s (1785-1794) governorship, he focused on the inland government, the development of agriculture and the increase of revenue.⁶⁰ Van de Graaff was responsible for the development of plantations on a commercial scale. Cinnamon plantations made the colonial production in the southwest less dependent on the goodwill of the Kandyan king, who had to allow the cinnamon peelers to work in his forests. Figure 1 shows three Company officials admiring a pepper plantation. Pepper, like areca nuts and cardamom, was a product mostly grown in private gardens. Van de Graaff intended the Magampattu to become the ‘breadbasket’ of the island. The Magampattu was the area east of Matara that was occupied by the Dutch after the peace treaty of 1766. This *pattu* was situated on the break of the low-country wet zones (Colombo, Galle, Matara, e.g.) and the dry zones.⁶¹ In order to cultivate rice in the Matara dessavony, drainage projects were initiated to prevent floods in the low country wet zones and irrigation projects were needed for the dry zones.⁶²

⁵⁶ Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment*, 29–30, 48; Belt, ‘Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794’, 17.

⁵⁷ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 26.

⁵⁸ Dewasiri, 62–67.

⁵⁹ Dewasiri, 26, 32, 93, 94.

⁶⁰ Alicia Schrikker explains Van de Graaff’s policy detailed in her monograph: *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815: Expansion and Reform*.

⁶¹ A *pattu* was part of a *corle*. A *corle* contained two or more *pattus* and was the administrative subdivision of a district. In the case of the Magampattu it was the Matara dessavony.

⁶² Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815*, 54, 63, 78–79.



Figure 1: Anonymous, View of the Pepper Plantation in the Baygam Area, anonymous, c. 1750. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. RP-T-00-3251

The Matara dessavony, together with the Batticaloa, Uva, Hambantota and Galle districts, was once part of the ancient Kingdom of Ruhana. Far away from the ancient Anuradhapura Kingdom,⁶³ Ruhana was founded around 200 BC. Revolts and uprisings usually originated in this south-eastern area of Sri Lanka. Ruhana also used to be a stronghold of freedom and resistances when foreign rulers invaded or conquered the island.⁶⁴ In one of the first petitions written during the uprising, the Sinhalese inhabitants actually called upon the memory of the Kingdom of Ruhana: ‘In former ages, deep in the rough countryside of Ruhana was a king who had his residence there. It was under his watch that giants with amazing strength dammed a tank over there.’⁶⁵ A village and its tank were common features during the Anuradhapura period (377 BC-1017 AD), especially in the dry zones.⁶⁶ Hundreds of water tanks are now still visible reminders of ancient kingdoms.⁶⁷ At the end of the eighteenth century the oral histories about the tank of Badagiriya, built by giants, initiated fear and resistance.

⁶³ The Anuradhapura Kingdom was the first kingdom in Sri Lanka, established in the fourth century BC.

⁶⁴ C. W. Nicholas and Senarat Paranavitana, *A Concise History of Ceylon, from the Earliest Times to the Arrival of the Portuguese in 1505* (Colombo: Ceylon University Press, 1961), 5–6. I am indebted to Albert van den Belt for drawing my attention to the Kingdom of Ruhana and its history of resistance.

⁶⁵ NA (NL), HR 595, 25-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §19.

⁶⁶ Nicholas and Paranavitana, *A Concise History of Ceylon, from the Earliest Times to the Arrival of the Portuguese in 1505*, 3.

⁶⁷ Belt, ‘Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794’, 58.

1.2 *The uprising of 1790*

Around the Sinhalese New Year in 1790 turmoil broke out in the interior of the Matara dessavony. On Monday 19 April 1790 the first reports of the dessava arrived in Galle. Dessava Christiaan van Angelbeek, assisted by prominent headmen, updated his superior, commander Sluijsken about the disturbances. In his first letter, Van Angelbeek wrote that a week before he had heard about troubles in the Kandabodapattu. Some people had refused to work in Badagiriya. During the following days, messages reached Van Angelbeek that more people in the Kandabodapattu were displeased about the journey to Badagiriya. Van Angelbeek responded by sending a message that he never intended the people to work against their will on the dam in the Magampattu. Only the persons who applied voluntarily would, from now on, be ordered to work there.⁶⁸ As the soothing announcement of Van Angelbeek had not calmed the inhabitants, he sent two *mudaliyars* to examine the matter. In the following days, inhabitants of other pattus and *corles* in the Matara district followed the example of the people from the Kandabodapattu. Therefore, Van Angelbeek asked the Commander in Galle for military support as the growing group of more than 7000 protesters became too threatening.⁶⁹

The council of Galle decided on sending armed forces and a commission with two of its Landraad members, Ferdinand Adriaan van Schuler and Pieter de Vos. The prominent headmen – to whom the insurgents did not listen anymore – had asked for an investigation committee consisting of members of the political council of Colombo. Van Angelbeek also wished that the Governor in Colombo assigned these members with the task to investigate the dessava's own functioning. When a commission from Galle, instead of from Colombo, arrived at Matara, Van Angelbeek closed the gates. Afterwards, Van Angelbeek explained his rejection; he had not received any announcement of the appointment of this commission. In his opinion, the grandeur with which the commission arrived, had been over the top as well.⁷⁰ The council of Galle, with Sluijsken as chairman, wrote Van Angelbeek that from experience insurgencies like this should be dealt with as fast as possible by 'gently putting out the smouldering fire.' Members of the Galle Landraad should investigate the reasons for the uprising and put the insurgents to ease. Above all, the investigators replaced Van Angelbeek, from that moment on. This reduced his authority tremendously.⁷¹

On 21 April 1790, the commission of Galle started unravelling the uprising.⁷² Van Schuler and De Vos ordered the protesters to write their complaints on olas. The protesting mob asked the

⁶⁸ SLNA, 1/2913, 19 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle relating to the rebellion in the Matara, f. 1-6.

⁶⁹ SLNA, 1/2913, 19 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle relating to the rebellion in the Matara, f. 7.

⁷⁰ SLNA, 1/2913, 20 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle, f. 12-15, SLNA, 1/2913, 21 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle, f. 16-38.

⁷¹ SLNA, 1/2913, 21 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle, f. 20, 'om zoo spoedig doenlijk op de zagste wijze het smeulende vuur te blussen.'

⁷² SLNA, 1/2913, 21 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle, f. 21.

investigators to wait with assembling complaints until they were all gathered.⁷³ According to a letter sent by the self-appointed leaders, the insurgents were pleased with the investigators and the possibility to hand in petitions.⁷⁴ However, De Vos and Van Schuler would not examine the petitions themselves, because at the beginning of May investigators from Colombo replaced them. On 30 April 1790 Colombo had sent a commission to Matara, consisting of the former *dessava* of Matara, Diederich Thomas Fretz,⁷⁵ and Abraham Samlant.⁷⁶ The investigation of the rebellion was now under the authority of Colombo.⁷⁷ Fretz and Samlant started their investigation on 4 May by travelling through the *dessavony*. In the Weligama corle they met fifty people who put Madoegodde Appu forward as their leader. He explained that the mandatory *corvee* work was a burden to them, thus the people of the Weligama corle joined the uprising. The insurgents asked the commission to come to Hakmana, as this was the place all the insurgents were planning to gather and present their complaints. The commissioners encouraged them to go back home and sent only a delegation to Hakmana. However, Madoegodde Appu complained about the *dessava* and four prominent headmen who mistreated the inhabitants. For as long as these people were not arrested, they would not turn back to their houses.⁷⁸

Some days later the commission arrived at the rest house in Hakmana where thousands of people came together. Samlant and Fretz told the people not to worry about any drawbacks for their disobedience. The investigators shared with the Governor that the people asked for replacement of Van Angelbeek, so they would have more frankness to speak up.⁷⁹ During the following days, the insurgents turned in many petitions and explicitly asked the commission to give preference to the complaints that were either on Van Angelbeek's government or that concerned the common good, the so-called 'general' complaints.⁸⁰ Meanwhile, in Colombo, the Governor ordered the arrest of four prominent headmen whom the insurgents in Hakmana accused of severe mismanagement: the *vidane muhandiram* of the Four Baygams, Don Francisco de Silva, the *mudaliyar* of the Wellabodapattu, Don Constantijn Rodrigo de Silva, the *baddecorn*⁸¹ Barthoulemeeus de Silva and the *muhandiram* of the Kandabodapattu, Don Joan. Remarkably, the majority of the forty-four petitions in which petitioners accused headmen, were against these four prominent headmen. (Table 1) These headmen defended themselves in front of

⁷³ SLNA, 1/2913, 23 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle, f. 29-37.

⁷⁴ SLNA, 1/2913, 24 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle, f. 41-45.

⁷⁵ Fretz was currently *dessava* of the Colombo *dessavony*.

⁷⁶ Samlant's father, also named Abraham Samlant, investigated the petitions during an earlier uprising in Matara in 1757.

⁷⁷ SLNA, 1/1566, 30 April 1790, Outward Correspondence, Council of Colombo to Sluijsken and the Council of Galle.

⁷⁸ NA (NL), HR 596, 7 May 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

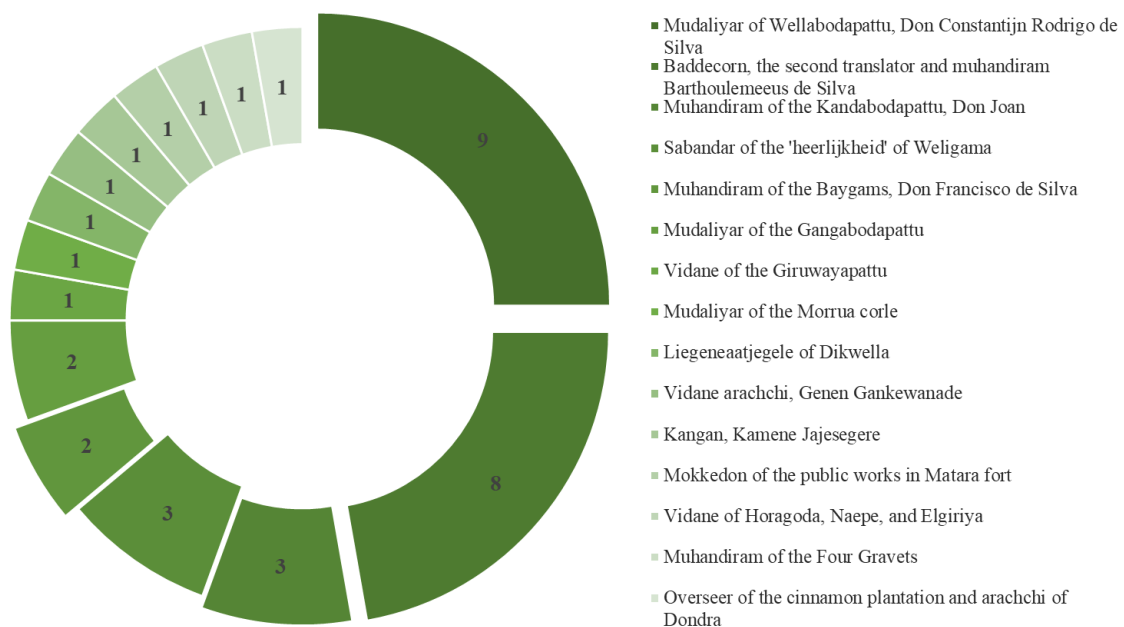
⁷⁹ NA (NL), HR 596, 10 May 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

⁸⁰ NA (NL), HR, 596, 11-12 May 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

⁸¹ The exact meaning of the function of the *baddecorn* is yet unclear to me. According to Lodewijk Wagenaar ('Vreemde Ogen Dwingen Niet', 126) the *baddecorn* was responsible for the collection of the paddy tax, given in kind. Petitioners also added to the title *baddecorn*, titles as *muhandiram* or second translator/secretary at the *porta* of *dessava* Van Angelbeek.

Samlant and Fretz and eventually asked for resignation from their job. It was during these meetings that scribes copied the first translated petitions. The defences of Van Angelbeek and of the accused headmen were added in the side-line. (Figure 2) Following three days of discussing the ‘general’ complaints, Fretz and Samlant released a so-called mandate-ola on 28 May 1790. This is a document with the actions upon the first set of petitions. In a letter to the Governor, Samlant and Fretz expressed their hope that the promised measures and amnesty would end the uprising.⁸² However, in reality, the petitioners were not yet satisfied. Their dissatisfaction was already visible when headmen spread the mandate-ola in pattus and corles.⁸³ Eyewitnesses described the rebellious attitude of certain participants in reports, although some protesters responded contently when they heard they would be dismissed from the trip to Badagiriya.⁸⁴

Table 1: Accused headmen



Source: NA (NL), HR 595, petition no. 1-44. Petitions translated between 17 May 1790 and 14 June 1790.

⁸² NA (NL), HR, 596, 29 May 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

⁸³ SLNA, 1/2908, 28 May 1790, Proceedings of the meetings of the commissioners Fretz and Samlant, f. 14-15.

⁸⁴ NA (NL), HR, 596, 9 June 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

hebben met alle bilckleid Lullen gepont, en afgedaen worden
1. onderstond, Statuise den 9 Junij 1790. 1. was getackend.
D. J. Frettt en St. Smitant.

Hiera na werden de transtaat olas van de Magampattoe
andere, in overweging genomen, en goedgevonden, de aanmerkingen
gen van den heer Despar van Angelbeck, en onse besluiden
beideiden over aalickal te notade, al

№ 8.

Beantwoording en aanmerking
van den heer Despar van Angelbeck en
besluiden van Heeren Kommissarissen

Artikel 1.

Nan de volkeren van de magampattoe sijn
in het geheel geen ordeal gegeven tot het aan
binden of herstellen van den dam. Zy sijn na
deze eijpesselijke van deesen dienst uitgeslo-
ten, gelyk ook van alle andere diensten sijn ten
begyne hebben eenige wynege ordeal en alleng
tijt mij wille in het geseeten van maantment
ke dan eenigens van bespilage getuind en
eenige weenag dienst tot het oprichten van
opstallen vearagt. myne ordeal omtrent de
wijze hoedany de volkeren moeten behan-
del worden bleekte ten volen tijt tot by
gaand betracht viel mynen brief van den
18 Oct. jleden aan den Resident Stronck
man.

Het transporteren van goederen van de
Lerayp na Maddegia, waas over dulle min-
stred klager is sijn onrechtvaardig het hand-
porteren heeft bestaan in eenige provisioen
en goederen van mij, die ik na deoraandt ge-
schiden hebbe en tot welk transport zy juist
van oudt af verplegt sijn geweest.

Omtrent de verstrickingen van onderhand
van de Kommissarissen sijn gure minne ordeal
gegeven. Zedat de aanstelling van den Resident
Stronckman sijn gure andere hoorden al
daar gure, dan de modlaas Sinnickoon het
en de modlaas van de Wellibade, paltoe,
aan, dat, van te rease ik welc sijn gure

verstrickingen

Translaat Singaleese klacht
ola van de gesamenlyke ingezetenen
van de Magampattoe ingebied.

Artikel 1.

Voor twee à drie Seilend Jaeren was er een
Koning, Doctoe Gemeene Ladysasoeman
Wabande genaend die de dam van Madde
grijze door Reuden heeft laaten ophou-
wen dewelke voltooit Zynde heeft oem
koning dezelve aan de Tempels op-
gevoerd en by Leker algemeen hongers-
nood is dezelve verlaaten geworden
maas nu heeft den tegenwoordige heer

Matireebe Despar ons geordonneerd
leggende tanks in staat te brengen
het welk niet geschieden kan mij lio-
ben eger adbaas eenige maanden ge-
weekt niet let aanplanten van kring-
nen, bouwen van Rieft huijden en met

het bloemnaeken van de aanhoogten
Op den dam waas toe mij genoodtacht
sijn

verstrickingen gidaa
geheel niet gedaan
man

Extracte
1789. m
"dint"
gedicht

Voor de maand
binder van de
kormen bejorn
van dellen dam
Zetene van de
delen gebalukt
het phoonmak
rukening van
viden Lullen de
van den dam
andere kortel
het phoonmak
viden, en H. l.
door de getonit
door de onttit
by myne min
gure andere
en vordel
bungen, en te
vra huij la
Koddeid 1. g
Hier op is
den Rijk
gebalukt
getog v
ous gebr
verstricke
Wanne
den Rijk
ger aan
dan een
braa v

Op het Artikel

Figure 2: Translation of a Sinhalese complaint-ola by the inhabitants of the Magampattu, with in the side-line the defense of Van Angelbeck and the actions taken by the investigators. Source: NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 8.

1.3 *Petitions in the archive*

The Company's activity in Asia is, according to Johannes Cornelis Heesterman, characterized by the rationalistic tendency to control by exhaustive rules and regulations. Heesterman uses the practice of keeping thombos in Sri Lanka as an example in his article on the differences between the 'warrior', the Portuguese Estado da Índia, and the 'merchant', the Dutch East India Company in Sri Lanka. This institution, with a Sinhalese origin, was dedicated to the registration of land and population in coastal Sri Lanka. Heesterman wonders if the regulative perfectionism of the VOC might actually have cancelled rationality. The practice of extensive reporting and information gathering was time-consuming and expensive. Not all information could effectively be used. The great number of documents created on the disturbances in Matara dessavony shows once again the colonial state as 'information-hungry machine.'

Since the VOC was a paper-empire, it is not surprising that the investigators asked the people to hand in written petitions. Only at the moment, people presented petitions and requests to the dessava or his *porta* servants, the complaint gained value to Van Angelbeek. This becomes visible from what he wrote in the side-line of a petition on incompetent plantation overseers. Van Angelbeek questioned the veracity of the complaint as no one had ever complained about these overseers, not even when the dessava visited the plantations.⁸⁵ Apparently, it was the tangibility of a petition or an earlier notion of a problem that increased the credibility to Van Angelbeek. Some petitions never made it into the archive. For instance, the petition, with the request to reappoint Van Angelbeek as dessava. It was withdrawn because it seemed that one single person made all the different signatures. VOC officials might have been prejudiced by the 'unbelievable' topic as they discharged the petition. Moreover, they overlooked the fact that people might not have had a signature. To the colonial administrators, the original petitions on palm-leaves were not important, only the translation made the petition worthy for the archive. People who were not able to write or did not have someone else writing for them were excluded from the possibility to transfer their complaints to the VOC officials. Thus, the paper-empire silenced these people and their possible complaints.

During the disturbances in the Matara dessavony every single event was reported and VOC officials collected lots of petitions. On the basis of petitions, the commissioners could more easily unravel the reasons for the unrest and take action upon it. However, the officials also made clear that they would only respond in the advantage of the people if they calmed down and turned back to their villages. Subsequently, the officials wished to stop the protest before it would turn into a rebellion that would threaten the position of the VOC. Everyone was ordered to wait at home on the settlement of their petitions. Ann Stoler convincingly states that 'if colonial documents reflected the supremacy of reason, they also recorded an emotional economy manifest in disparate understandings of what was

⁸⁵ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §4.

imagined, what was feared, what was witnessed, and what was overheard.⁸⁶ The continuous request for petitions also reveals a certain kind of paranoia. Still, the – almost obsessive – collection of information did not restore peace. Stoler notices a prompt reflex of the VOC on a commotion: appointing a commission of inquiry. A commission produced hundreds or even thousands of pages and by this, new truths and realities, but this did not always provide solutions. During the disturbances in Matara and Galle at the end of the 1750s investigators also collected petitions. Only after a year, the Governor and his council responded to the situation to stop the wrongdoings to the inhabitants. However, new reports about the troubles in the Galle corle did not lead to any action. According to Lodewijk Wagenaar, the VOC mentality of not taking the inhabitants' complaints seriously eventually led to the rebellion in 1760.⁸⁷ It seems that the VOC used its archival power – premediated or as a last resort – to ‘solve’ problems and keep its authority. By investigating, interviews, collecting complaints and promising that commissions would eventually come with solutions, without effectively taking action on the initial problems.

What is more, the layout of the petitions registered within the ‘proceedings of the meetings of the commissioners Dietrich Thomas Fretz and Abraham Samlant’ show that during the meetings Van Angelbeek’s functioning was actually central, instead of the grievances of the petitioners. Van Angelbeek responded in the side-lines on the accusations against him and his government and the investigators drafted resolutions upon the petitions. From Matara, copies of the petitions and the memorandum addressed to the inhabitants on 28 May 1790 were sent to Colombo. The response of the Governor indicates that in Colombo the petitions were not processed at all. The Governor only responded on the mandate-ola. The Council of Colombo suggested some minor changes, mainly to make sure it did not contradict the Company’s policy and economic progress.⁸⁸

In the end, the uprising took place in a time of private power struggles among Company officials. This struggle was agitated by the uprising. Sluijsken, as commander of Galle, was superior to Van Angelbeek, who was in charge of the inland administration of the Matara dessavony. However, as cousin of Van de Graaff, Van Angelbeek got more privileges. Sluijsken and Van de Graaff also had a troubled relationship as the appointment of different commissions shows. Especially the troubles around the first commission – Van Angelbeek disrespected the commission from Galle – and the power struggle between Van Angelbeek and Van de Graaff, and Sluijsken show that the accepted ‘rule of reason’ in Sri Lanka was actually more often messy colonial order. Where emotions influenced the actions of colonial officials and the creation of sources.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance’, 101.

⁸⁷ Wagenaar, ‘Vreemde Ogen Dwingen Niet’, 138.

⁸⁸ SLNA, 1/755, 1 June 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon.

⁸⁹ For more on reason and paranoia in the colonial state, see: Ann Stoler, ‘Reason Aside: Reflections on Enlightenment and Empire’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Graham Huggan, Oxford Handbooks of Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

1.4 An unthinkable rebellion?

On 9 June, Samlant and Fretz wrote to Van Angelbeek that the uprising was worse than ever.⁹⁰ During the first two weeks of June, the rebellion extended to other parts of the Maritime Provinces.⁹¹ Rebels threatened the peaceful inhabitants of the Matara dessavony. The Governor decided on sending soldiers to defend the fort in Matara and peaceful inhabitants. Moreover, commander Sluijsken would take the place of the investigators and Mattheus Petrus Raket replaced Van Angelbeek as dessava. Sluijsken was going to investigate the petitions again as the petitioners instantly rejected the promised actions in the memorandum.⁹² The Council of Ceylon instructed Sluijsken to restore the peace, but without losing the Company's profit out of sight.⁹³

During this turbulent time, a fear of involvement of the kingdom of Kandy arose among the VOC officials. Moreover, Sluijsken turned his attention to the leaders of the revolt. He tried to work together with them, but it was the second amnesty and the second mandate-ola that caused – according to Sluijsken – an ‘electric shock’ among the ‘good’ headmen who promised to campaign vigorously in favour of the Company.⁹⁴ Sluijsken made decisions after reading the objections of the petitioners on the first mandate-ola. Peace was restored in the Matara dessavony after Sluijsken's mandate-ola of 7 July 1790. On 20 July the council of Galle appointed Raket, Samlant, De Vos and Van Schuler to investigate the so-called personal petitions. Some of those were already collected by Samlant and Fretz, others arrived at a later time. As earlier commissions had postponed these charges, the new investigators dealt with dozens of petitions.⁹⁵

After July 1790, there was still some tension in the Matara dessavony as a couple of inhabitants designated Van Angelbeek as their dessava and waited for his return. What is more, a group of former insurgents feared that the promise of amnesty would soon expire.⁹⁶ In February 1791, the governor and his council reaffirmed through an official decree, a so-called *plakkaat*, the amnesty to the people of the dessavony of Matara and the Galle corle as well as the dessavony of Colombo. Everything would be forgotten, as long as the inhabitants would behave as loyal subjects.⁹⁷ Governor Van de Graaff also put to halt the investigation of the relationship between the revolt and the prominent headmen in February

⁹⁰ NA (NL), HR, 596, 9 June 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

⁹¹ The unrest had spread to the Galle *corle*, the Colombo dessavony and other areas in Sri Lanka. Belt, ‘Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794’, 63–64.

⁹² SLNA, 1/755, 12 June 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon, SLNA, 1/2912, 17 June 1790, Notes of the Political meeting in Matara, f. 29-32.

⁹³ SLNA, 1/2912, 17 June 1790, Notes of the Political meeting in Matara, f. 30.

⁹⁴ SLNA, 1/755, 5 August 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon.

⁹⁵ A couple of newly arrived petitions are documented in SLNA, 1/6761, Annexes to the minutes of the sessions of the special commission. SLNA, 1/1515, 20 July 1790, Copies of Galle council minutes, forwarded to Colombo.

⁹⁶ SLNA, 1/2159, 12 January 1791, Correspondence of the “Binnenlandsche Departement”, f. 6-12.

⁹⁷ Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, II:937-938, no. 647, 4 February 1790.

1791, to refrain Kandy to get grip on the people. At the end of 1790 Kandyans had blocked the passage of cinnamon peelers and there had been some clashes between VOC and Kandyan soldiers.⁹⁸

In the second half of the year 1790, the focus of the VOC officials was mainly on identifying the people responsible for the uprising and not on the grievances of the inhabitants. Sluijsken presumed that the agrarian population could not have invoked the uprising. Here we see the tendency Michel-Rolph Trouillot notices that at moments of source creation, the sources often privilege some events over others, not always the ones privileged by the actors, the petitioners in this case.⁹⁹ In his first report to the Governor Sluijsken pointed at the mismanagement of Van Angelbeek and the Kingdom of Kandy as the initiator of the uprising. He supposed that the Kingdom of Kandy might have encouraged the inhabitants to revolt, to reclaim the coasts of Sri Lanka for the Kingdom.¹⁰⁰ Sluijsken accused Van Angelbeek of making wrong assumptions on the seriousness of the uprising; he also condemned Van Angelbeek's choice to go back to Matara after he heard of the uprising, instead of visiting the upset people in de Kandabodapattu. Sluijsken also complained about the disrespect Van Angelbeek showed to the commission from Galle and to Sluijsken himself, as the *dessava* frequently refused to share information with him.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, Sluijsken guessed that the prominent headmen took advantage of the inhabitants for years. To Sluijsken an uprising provoked by the agrarian population and their minor headmen seems unthinkable. Afraid that their behaviour would now result in an uprising against them, the headmen forced, according to Sluijsken, the people to work in Badagiriya to enhance tension. Sluijsken argues that the headmen would have told Van Angelbeek that people were discontent with going to Badagiriya if they were not planning to provoke an uprising against Van Angelbeek.¹⁰² In an account on the functioning of Van de Graaff in 1792 Sluijsken pointed at the highest Sinhalese official, *mahamudaliyar* Nicolaas Dias Abeysinghe as the instigator of war and unrest in the countryside. (Figure 3) Due to the conflict between Sluijsken and Van de Graaff, it would have been convenient to accuse the *mudaliyars* and the highest native official with both influence on the inhabitants and the policy of the VOC. Both worked closely together with Van de Graaff. Thus, Sluijsken accused the Governor of trusting the wrong persons.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Belt, 'Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794', 44. In 1791 and 1792, Governor Van de Graaff commenced expeditions against the Kandyan kingdom for violating the treaty of 1766 by attracting the French.

⁹⁹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Notes of the Political meeting in Matara, f. 62-67.

¹⁰¹ SLNA, 1/755, 12 August 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon. Later, the merchant of Galle Cornelius Dionysius Kraijenhoff also wrote that the commission made disastrous mistakes: NA (NL), VOC 3884, Letters and Papers, 'Copy of the letter by the discharged authority Kraijenhoff [in Galle] to the Governor Van de Graaff of 14 October 1790 about the riots in the Matara *dessavony*, f. 2197 – 2207.

¹⁰² SLNA, 1/755, 12 August 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon.

¹⁰³ Belt, 'Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794', 67.

In this regard, the Haitian Revolution – although as a revolution far more significant – is useful as a comparison. According to Trouillot, the revolution had the peculiar characteristic of being unthinkable when the enslaved rose up against their owners and against the colonial power in general.¹⁰⁴ It was impossible for eighteenth-century men and women in the West to understand that enslaved could revolt. To acknowledge this possibility was to make enslaved people human. Moreover, the Haitian Revolution was unthinkable in the way it challenged slavery and racism. Consequently, Trouillot uncovers in the records that writers presume that the revolution must have been provoked or suggested by others than the enslaved themselves: royalists, mulattoes, or other external agents. Plantation owners, on the other hand, could not deny the resistance, but they still undermined the events by trivializing its manifestations.¹⁰⁵ It seems that first Van Angelbeek and later the two commissions trivialized the manifestations of the insurgents as well. Up to a point that ‘suddenly’ there was a severe need of military troops or that the rebellion ‘suddenly’ spread or was worse than ever. It is presumable that the VOC officials wished to keep their record as vigorous administrators and refrained from admitting their failing approach to their higher authority.

Comparing the use of ‘rebellion’ with the revolts between 1796-1798 during the British colonial period gives reason to think that as, after some months, peace was still not restored, the VOC officials might have decided to call the disturbances a rebellion. All the official accounts of resistance in 1796-1798 in Sri Lanka portray the events as they were a fully-fledged ‘rebellion’ that the British colonial authorities were facing. Wickramasinghe thinks that this is an exaggerated view. She suggests that the colonial authorities were clearly embarrassed that their army could not pacify the small island of Sri Lanka.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, I suggest that the VOC officials in charge might have been in need of an excuse to hide their own insufficiency and subsequently moved from describing the uprising from a ‘samenrotting’ to a rebellion. ‘Samenrotting’ can be translated with gathering together with the intention to revolt.¹⁰⁷ The sources imply that everything started with people striking from their work, mainly to express their discontent, transmit their complaints, and receive justice. In the second part of the year 1790, when some people became violent and peace was still not restored, the word ‘rebellion’ came up.

¹⁰⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 73.

¹⁰⁵ Trouillot, 83–103.

¹⁰⁶ Wickramasinghe, ‘Many Little Revolts or One Rebellion?’, 177.

¹⁰⁷ ‘SAMENROTTEN’, WNT (Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal), accessed 4 October 2019, <http://gtb.inl.nl/iWDB/search?actie=article&wdb=WNT&id=M061885.re.2&lemmodern=samenrotting>.



Figure 3: Jan Brandes, Mahamudaliyar, Nicolaas Dias Abayasinha Amarasekera. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. NG-1985-7-3-124. *Mudaliyar or interpreter of the governor of Ceylon wearing a green velvet coat and golden andoleer with a golden sword, and a golden chain.* (Translation: De Bruijn and Raben, *The World of Jan Brandes*, 309)

In historiography, the possibility that peasants could have partaken in the uprising out of their own motivation is also called into question. Albert van den Belt tries to unravel the conspiracies around the uprising and succeeds so far as he writes about secret meetings in the houses of prominent headmen, family members of the mahamudaliyar. He moves his attention fast to the prominent headmen, with Nicolaas Dias as the mastermind behind it all. According to Van den Belt, the minor headmen had no advantage in the uprising, as they submitted only one petition during the course of the uprising. Namely, about contracts of regulations (‘contracten van verbintenis’) they sealed with the VOC. These contracts compelled the headmen to harvest a certain amount of cash crops and spices in their plantations. As it looked like they would not succeed and would lose their money and position, they asked in one of the petitions to be released from this contract.¹⁰⁸ This statement of Van den Belt is surprising as minor headmen like *arachchis*, *mudaliyars* and *vidanes* signed many petitions and represented the inhabitants in their villages and pattus. (Table 4)

Nevertheless, to Alicia Schrikker, from the first reports on the rebellion, it becomes clear that the inhabitants of the countryside objected to the work the main actors during the uprising. She assumes that the most important factor for the rebellion was the pressure on the agrarian population. Their headman forced them to work on the tank in Badagiriya in the Magampattu and at the same time, they were obliged to work on the cinnamon plantations. The latter was on orders of Governor Willem Jacob van de Graaff, while the first work was ordered by dessava Van Angelbeek.¹⁰⁹ Schrikker notices a clash of mentality between the VOC and the native population. She thinks that the heavy work and inherent mistreatment during the work on the water reservoir might not have been the only reason to switch to rebellion, also climatological changes might have influenced the unrest. In previous years, the labourers did not object to working at VOC projects, probably, as Schrikker suggests, because in time of bad harvest they received rice and sometimes a little money for their work. In the year 1790, the labourers

¹⁰⁸ Belt, ‘Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794’, 51–52, 67–68.

¹⁰⁹ Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815*, 71, 79–80.

expected a good crop, as they made clearly known, therefore they might not see any advantage in doing this work.¹¹⁰

Using the line of thought of Ranajit Guha, I argue that even if mahamudaliyar Nicolaas Dias planned a revolt to strengthen his own position, thousands of people from the lowest segments would not have joined the uprising in a state of absent-mindedness.¹¹¹ Guha notes that it was risky for peasants to turn the limited safety they had within a feudal relationship upside down. Peasants and minor headmen might have found themselves in an inter-elite conflict between the VOC, Kandy and the mahamudaliyar, but they still signed petitions to end their grievances and tried to get attention for their situation by striking. They made the choice to strike, gather together, submit petitions, stand up for their rights and subsequently put their lives in danger. I will expand in the next chapters on how the peasants turned things upside down by striking, but also on the rhetoric they adopted in their petitions and the reasons they adduced for their dissatisfaction.

1.5 Conclusion

The forty-four petitions this study relies heavily upon, entered the VOC archives in a time of protest of the inland population after appeals from colonial officials to write their complaints down. The petitioners asked for settlement on the 'general' petitions, probably because the issues discussed had a huge impact on their lives. However, the translations of their petitions ended up in a volume that foremost examined the government of Van Angelbeek. In the investigation of the process of the uprising in the summer of 1790, almost no importance was attached to the testimonies of the petitioners. The wish for written complaints seems to be a manifestation of the 'information-hungry machine' the VOC. Here we see the mechanism Trouillot wrote about at work: Even though the reports contain petitions, the petitioners are completely silenced in the documents and letters and probably also during the council meetings in Colombo. The inequalities experienced by the actors lead also here to uneven historical power in the inscription of traces and the sources created.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Schrikker, 71, 79–80.

¹¹¹ Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', 45.

¹¹² Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 48.

Chapter Two: Protesting and petitioning

In between Weligama and Matara we encountered hundreds of people (...) who submitted many petitions and requested merely that I would accrue them fair justice and compassion; They were not unfaithful subjects from the Company or Kekkelles - mutineers in Sinhalese - as they were said to be, but they only [rose up to] file complaints about the mistreatment and oppression they were facing, since they were not able to undergo it any longer, they saw no other way of showing their dissatisfaction than assembling themselves, since their complaints were not listened to at the porta of the dessava.¹¹³

Pieter Sluijsken reproduced conversations, like the above, from his investigation period in his reports to the Governor. It is remarkable that these people dissociated themselves from the mutinous mobs; ‘Kekkelles’ might be the Dutch spelling of *kæralikāra*, ‘rebel’ in Sinhalese. The inhabitants told him that they had been striking and assembling to receive the wished attention for their grievances. They did not define themselves as part of a rebellion, even though they refrained from going to Badagiriya or doing other Company work.¹¹⁴ In this regard, Michael Adas’s account on avoidance protests is useful to understand the actions of resisting peasants. Adas sees the non-confrontational modes of peasant response to the demands of the state and elite groups as a middle ground between the passive and revolutionary responses on scaling back the demands of the state and elite groups and thereby retain enough of what they produce to build decent lives for themselves. Colonial Java and Burma are his research areas.¹¹⁵ This chapter deals with the transformative agency of collective resistance and petitioning in the Matara dessavony. Why and how did the protesters switch to petitioning? This chapter starts with introducing village defence mechanisms in the (pre)colonial area and the role petitioning played. In the second part, the collectivity and diversity of the protesters and petitioners are central.

¹¹³ SLNA, 1/755, 12 August 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon, ‘Wij ontmoeteden van Belligam tot Mature honderden van menschen (...) die mij veele klagtschriften overgaaven, en alleen verzogten dat ik hun dog een goed regt wilde laten toekoomen, en mij over hun ontfermen; dat zij geene ongehoorsaame onderdaanen van der Ed comp of Kekkelles /: muiltelingen in het Singaleesch:/ waaren gelijk men hun noemde, maar dat zij zich alleen beklagden over mishandelingen en dwingelandij, die zij onmogelijk langer uithouden konden, in die zij op geene andere wijze hadden kunnen te kennen geeven als zig te zaamen te trekken, wijl hunnes klagten aan de porta van de E dessave niet gehoord wierden. Zij betuigden over mijne komste veel vreugde; met verklaering dat ze op mijne regtvaardigheid vertrouwden, en zig aan mijne uijtspraak zouden onderwerpen.’

¹¹⁴ A similar situation had occurred when investigator Fretz visited Dondra in June 1790. He met villagers at a lookout station, who told him they did not have any bad intentions, but that the rebels had forced them staff the post. They handed in some petitions, as they had complaints about their mudaliyar and some other business. NA (NL), 1.04.17, 596, 13 June 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

¹¹⁵ Adas, ‘From Avoidance to Confrontation’, 127.

2.1 Avoidance and confrontational protest

A significant part of resistances of peasants in pre-colonial states was avoidance protest. Away from the power of the ruler, the peasants were subject to the demands of regional lords. When regular defences against the exploitation by regional lords failed, peasants turned to more extreme measures to protect their interests, by rioting and rebelling, but also by passive withdrawal or searching for alternative sources of patron protection, Adas lists. Rebellions in the precolonial period were in fact mainly inter-elite rebellions, so peasants had a lot to lose. Therefore, peasants migrated *en masse* because new patrons might provide a better economic situation. Sometimes, defecting cultivators fled to a rival kingdom or joined wandering troops or bandit gangs. All these acts of protest drew attention to the misrule of the former patron. This shift also reduced the power, status, and esteem of the original lord.¹¹⁶

The flight of the cinnamon peelers to the Kandyan provinces is a fine example of Adas' definition of avoidance protest. The VOC put strict penalties and punishments on this group, without a doubt to activate them to ensure a continuous supply of cinnamon.¹¹⁷ When they had the chance, the Salagama crossed the Kandyan borders where they often found protection. In 1757 hundreds of cinnamon peelers circumvented their labour and the Kandyan ruler Kirti Sri Rajasinha refused to hand them over to the Dutch.¹¹⁸ Cinnamon peelers in Sri Lanka did not only ran away from the labour they were forced to do but also seriously affected and challenged Dutch rule, especially because the Kandyan king could intervene in uprisings against the Dutch. A proclamation from the king of Kandy could already mobilize inhabitants in the Maritime Provinces.¹¹⁹ The Kandyan king did not use his influence in 1790. Some insurgents travelled to the Kandyan territories for another patron, or at least to seek military support. The Kandyan king received them at his court, but immediately sent them back and advised them to subject themselves to the righteousness of the VOC.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Michael Adas, 'From Avoidance to Confrontation: Peasant Protest in Precolonial and Colonial Southeast Asia', in *Colonialism and Culture*, ed. Nicholas B. Dirks (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 93–99.

¹¹⁷ Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815*, 33–34; Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment*, 30.

¹¹⁸ Wagenaar, 'Vreemde Ogen Dwingen Niet', 117.

¹¹⁹ This happened during the Cinnamon Peeler's Rebellion of 1735-1736. Not only did discontented people find shelter in the Kandyan provinces, one of the Buddhist monks who was roaming the country also issued an *ola* in the king's name. He called upon the people of the Matara district not to "obey or render services to the Dutch", but to acknowledge the sovereignty of the king of Kandy. The peelers gathered, refused to work and complained about unjust treatment by their headmen. See: Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment*, 53–54.

¹²⁰ Belt, 'Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794', 58. The self-proclaimed leader of the uprising, Madoegodde Appu went several times to the Kandyan territories, to flee from repercussions and later to prepare a new resistance. Sluijsken thought that Madoegodde was at the Company's side, because he had for example sent more than one hundred people to help with a boat from the Company that needed to be put onshore. But Madoegodde Appu easily changed sides and initiated another uprising in Matara in the second half of 1790. (SLNA, 1/755, 12 August 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon) When it did not have the desired effect, he traveled back to the Kandyan King to ask for support, but he was sent back at a Kandyan post for not having permission from the King. However, Madoegodde did not throw in the towel, but together with some followers dressed in Kandyan dress. They went to the Matara dessavony and later to the Galle corle, where

After the arrival of colonial rule to Java and Burma violent protests became more common. Colonial rule transformed the ‘contest states’ (pre-colonial states) into more centralized and bureaucratic systems. Former sparsely populated areas became occupied, which made it harder to flee to frontier areas. Moreover, the colonial military and bureaucracy reached further and decreased possibilities to withdraw from the demands of rulers.¹²¹ The demands on peasants and cinnamon peelers in Sri Lanka were higher under the Dutch than under pre-colonial kings. Nirmal Dewasiri convincingly shows that in Sri Lanka this change disturbed the balance of labour distribution between the traditional rajakariya-system and the basic production activity of the peasant. The VOC transformed the rajakariya-system into a ‘sort of quasi wage-labour system in contrast to the unpaid character of the pre-colonial system.’¹²² At least in Java and Burma, European presence did not bring a sudden end to village defence mechanisms and avoidance peasant protests. ‘Virtually all peasant groups continued to rely on modes of avoidance protest well into the colonial area, and often this attachment continued long after they had ceased to be effective.’¹²³

2.2 *Petitioning as a defence mechanism*

Ultimately, it appears that many peasants rose up to defend their lives. The writers of the first petition discussed by Samlant and Fretz argued that although they experienced grievances they had for long stayed in their villages and subjected themselves to the law because the injustices ‘were not life-threatening’.¹²⁴ However, when they got the order to go to Badagiriya their attitude changed because they were not able to imagine anything worse than dying there. Many had died during the work in Badagiriya, during their travel back or at home of fever and diarrhea.¹²⁵ The abandoned jungle was full of wild animals such as elephants, bears, tigers, and buffalos, that threatened the lives of the workers. Others died after drinking the water at Badagiriya. VOC officials also arrested people who went home because they got the fever. As punishment, the so-called deserters were sent back chained, together with their wives. More than ten thousand men were ordered to travel on 15 April 1790 Badagiriya-bound. As every man of a family was called upon, the fear arose among the people that this would depopulate the whole dessavony.¹²⁶

Often the very first act of protest against the mistreatment of local lords or too high taxes employed by dissident peasants was one that had official approval and was custom for years. In Burma

they told the people that the Kandyan King welcomed them at his court and appointed them to initiate a rebellion. NA (NL), VOC 3885, Abstract of the secret resolution of 15 November 1790 about the summon of Madoegodde Appu of Galle, f. 2399-2404)

¹²¹ Adas, ‘From Avoidance to Confrontation’, 111–15.

¹²² Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 95. See also Chapter Four.

¹²³ Adas, ‘Comment’, 129–30.

¹²⁴ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §12, ‘van geen levengevaar waren’.

¹²⁵ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §12.

¹²⁶ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 3.

and Java, peasants could petition a higher official or the monarch himself. In Java, dissatisfied people organised processions to the royal palace or residence of the most powerful lord in the region.¹²⁷ The accepted method in colonial Sri Lanka was to approach local headmen with a dispute about land or obligatory work that contradicted custom or caste. If the headmen were not able to solve a dispute, accusers were referred to the commander of Galle or *dessava* of Matara. Under special circumstances, the people could appear before the Governor. If one neglected this procedure, severe punishments would follow.¹²⁸

The scene painted by church minister Jan Brandes in Figure 4 depicts a regular session of the *dessava* while hearing complaints and receiving requests. It does not represent a meeting of the Landraad, because during a meeting of the Landraad another European official would have been present.¹²⁹ The procedure at the *porta*, the *dessava*'s office, was the following: Prospective litigants first presented their cases orally or sent requests on *olas* to the *dessava* or other members of the council. If a request involved a complaint against another party, the council summoned both parties and their witnesses and fixed a date for the hearing.¹³⁰ The person on the far right is holding an *ola* either a request, petition or proof of land ownership. Nadeera Rupesinghe did not encounter people complaining about governing issues around the 1770s during her research in the Galle Landraad archives. 'Petitions were more likely to have been the avenue through which people complained directly about governing issues', Rupesinghe suggests. The petitions she looked at, from the period 1757-1758 of both Galle and Matara, do not reveal issues about the Landraad.¹³¹ However, the petitions and conversations with the people in 1790 contradict this.

During Sluijsken's investigation period, he experienced that the inhabitants lost their trust in the Matara Landraad. One protester told him, after Sluijsken redirected him to the Landraad, that he would rather have a soldier from Sluijsken's detachment passing judgment than a member from the Landraad!¹³² On 17 April 1790 around seven to eight thousand people from the Matara district had assembled at the border of the Giruvayapattu. Mudaliyar Tinnekoon spoke with them and heard of their plans to first go to Badagiriya to destroy the workplace, release the workers and march to Galle and Colombo to declare the grievances they had to experience for five years.¹³³ The protesters passed the *dessava* of Matara, apparently because they did not trust the Sinhalese servants and translators at the

¹²⁷ Adas, 'From Avoidance to Confrontation', 100–101.

¹²⁸ Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, II:494–95, no. 323, 31 January 1744 and 831–883, no. 576, 26 November 1784.

¹²⁹ Max de Bruijn and Remco Raben, eds., *The World of Jan Brandes, 1743-1808 : Drawings of a Dutch Traveller in Batavia, Ceylon and Southern Africa* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2004), 258–61.

¹³⁰ Seneviratne-Rupesinghe, 'Negotiating Custom, Colonial Lawmaking in the Galle Landraad', 35–36.

¹³¹ Seneviratne-Rupesinghe, 44.

¹³² SLNA, 1/755, 12 August 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon.

¹³³ SLNA, 1/2913, 19 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle relating to the rebellion in the Matara, f. 7.

porta of the dessava and they expected that their complaints would be ignored.¹³⁴ Or even worse, the persons who dared to make a complaint earlier against the mudaliyar of the Gangabodapattu and second translator at the porta got arrested and punished. The abovementioned headmen had forced inhabitants to deliver more gifts (*pingos*) than commonly for the dessava. Other headmen felt the pressure to ask their subjects to do this too. Due to the earlier events, people constrained from speaking up.¹³⁵



Figure 4: Jan Brandes, Dessave De Cocq and his officers at Hulftsdorp. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. NG-1985-7-1-9. Original caption: *Dessave (De Cocq) in Colombo in Ceylon, with the captains of the Sinhalese, seated on his veranda in order to settle affairs and disputes among the natives.*

The inhabitants of the villages of the rest houses of the Giruwayapattu experienced another hiccup in the legal process to submit complaints. They wrote that if their headmen could not provide justice, they had the right to appeal to superior lords. But at the moment they needed a report of the procedure of the application of their complaint to receive justice at a higher level. This took too much

¹³⁴ SLNA, 1/755, 12 August 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon, NA (NL), HR 595, Notes of the meetings of the commissioners from the Ceylonese government, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 3.

¹³⁵ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 2, §5.

time – they had to wait twenty or even thirty days. They endured this injustice for a long time, but now the people also had to work on the dam, clear the forests and build rest houses in Badagiriya. Women who heard that their husbands died in Badagiriya fled their villages, but lascorins arrested them and put them to work on rice fields. The dessava forced people around Tangalle to work in Badagiriya as well, threatening them that if they refused, their houses would be burned down, their women would be arrested and sent over there as well.¹³⁶ Consequently, the people of the villages of the rest houses of the Giruwayapattu ‘not being able to experience these injustices and as it is common among the Sinhalese to assemble, discontinued the aforementioned journey when the order was sent out to go to Badagiriya and the inhabitants of the corles, pattus and seaports started their journey, to inform the judges lords about the reasons for their strike and assembly.’¹³⁷

2.3 *The diffusion of the protesters and petitioners*

Striking and assembly might – besides the next step after the failure of the regular system to submit petitions – also be a means to attract the colonial investigators land inwards to show the gravity of the situation. Also, in 1757 and 1758, investigation committees travelled through the interior of Matara and Galle to listen to complaints and encouraged people to come to Matara to hand in their petitions.¹³⁸ It seemed common that VOC officials made a journey to talk with dissident inhabitants about their situation. In 1790, Sluijsken sent two members of the Galle Landraad to the disgruntled inhabitants of the Matara district.¹³⁹ Samlant and Fretz already encouraged in the first mandate-ola people with specific complaints to go to the Landraad, but Sluijsken really started with bringing everything back to normal: Petitioners had lost the documents of their *paraveni* (inherited) gardens and fields and the Company confiscated these lands. These petitioners wished that two European representatives and the *thombo-keeper* would visit them so they were able to point at the lands. Sluijsken redirected the petitioners to the dessava and his Landraad.¹⁴⁰ After a trip inland, Sluijsken resided close to Matara. Many people waited the next day outside to see him and presented their complaints. Sluijsken tried to win back trust and do them justice. In July he resigned from his position as investigator, as people continued to hand in petitions to him, instead of to the new dessava.¹⁴¹

¹³⁶ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 2, §17.

¹³⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 2, §19, ‘Wij deese onregten niet ondergaen kunnen en het onder den singaleesen van ouds gebruikelijk is, om zig te saemen te rotten zoo wel, als om dat ordre gegeven is om na badegiriego te gaen en de gesamentlijke inwoonders van de korles pattoes en zeehaevens op een dag vertrokken zijn en zig op de weg begeven hadden zoo hebben wij gemelde reizje gestaekt om deese onregten de regt doende heeren te kennen te geeven waartoe wij te saemen gerot zijn’.

¹³⁸ Wagenaar, ‘Vreemde Ogen Dwingen Niet’.

¹³⁹ SLNA, 1/2913, 21 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle relating to the rebellion in the Matara, f. 20.

¹⁴⁰ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluijsken, f. 49, article 17.

¹⁴¹ SLNA, 1/755, 12 August 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon.



Map 3: Place of residence if noted down in petitions. Source: NA (NL), HR 595, petition no. 1-44. Petitions translated between May 17, 1790 and June 12, 1790

The second commission met the disgruntled people at the rest house in Hakmana. Their leaders had asked the investigators Fretz and Samlant to meet them there.¹⁴² Hakmana was a small VOC outpost intended to safeguard the link between the coast and the small fort at Katuwana in the interior at the border with the Kandyan territories.¹⁴³ It is striking that the protesters chose a rest house. This was, however, not the first time, as in 1757 the investigator and his entourage also met dissident cultivators at rest houses.¹⁴⁴ Countless rest houses and schools in the inland played a role as the administrative centres of the Dutch. VOC officials spent the night at rest houses during trips through the countryside. From these places also regulations and rules were proclaimed and the general atmosphere among the inhabitants could here be measured.¹⁴⁵ Map 3 shows Hakmana situated in the middle of the places of residence of petitioners. The map does not show the corles and pattus the petitioners added to their name as their place of residence, Table 2 presents the amount of the petitions per corle and pattu, excluding the places pinned on Map 3. Still, this map gives a far indication of the diffusion of the petitioners. The village of Urubokka was the location furthest away from Matarara, more than 40 kilometres. This meant that peasants had to travel through the thick jungle for more than a day, if they wanted to bring their

¹⁴² SLNA, 1/2913, 20 April 1790, Minutes of the Secret Council of Galle relating to the rebellion in the Matarara, f. 20.

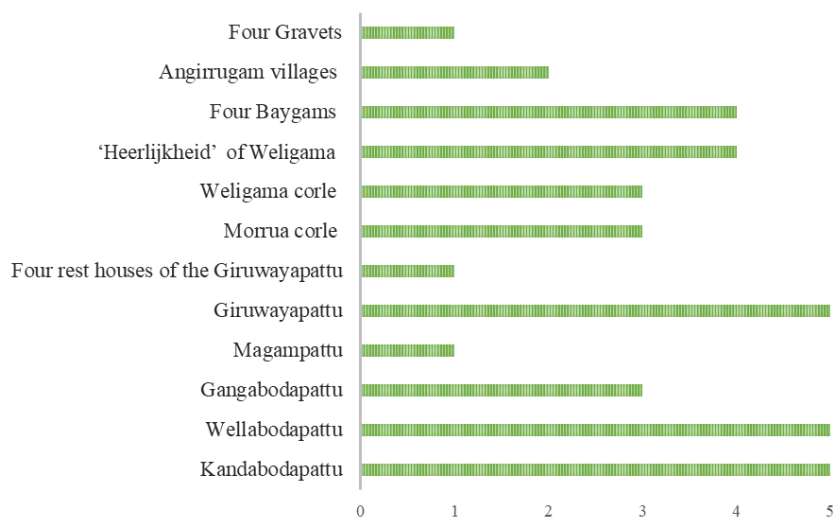
¹⁴³ 'Hakmana', Atlas of Mutual Heritage, accessed 1 November 2019, <http://www.atlasofmutualheritage.nl/en/Hakmana.511p>.

¹⁴⁴ Wagenaar, 'Vreemde Ogen Dwingen Niet'.

¹⁴⁵ Albert van den Belt, *Het VOC-bedrijf op Ceylon: een voorname vestiging van de Oost-Indische Compagnie in de 18de eeuw* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2008), 144, 275.

cases to the Landraad in Matara. Social standing, distance, and costs could be some of the reasons why people engaged or did not engage with this colonial forum.¹⁴⁶ Approaching the representatives of the Landraad closer to them, like at a rest house, might just have been easier and a reason to address the VOC judiciary.

Table 2: Pattus and corles petitioners resided in



Source: NA (NL), HR 595, petition no. 1-44. Petitions translated between 17 May 1790 and 14 June 1790.

2.4 A united front?

In her research on the perpetual ferment in colonial Sri Lanka, Jayawardena states that every popular protest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a 'united front' against perceived injustice. All revolts and insurgencies had an anti-imperialist content while reflecting the nostalgia for the old regime. There was an opposition to agents of the state 'in the form of East India Company officials, tax-gatherers and other administrators.'¹⁴⁷ In several instances in 1790, the inhabitants of one pattu disassociated themselves from the other pattus to receive privileges, as the following two examples portray. Inhabitants of the Kandabodapattu stood up for their rights in August 1790 as they heard that the petitions of the Wellabodapattu got priority in the investigation. They forced Van Schuler, as a delegate of the final investigation commission, to deal with their petitions first.¹⁴⁸ In July 1790, people of the Gangabodapattu of the Galle corle, followed the example of Matara district. Their leader, Willegodde Appu, asked his henchmen to drum like the land description took place. The *korala* of the Gangabodapattu of the Galle corle told the VOC official serving there that the people rose up because they heard of the privileges the people in the Matara district received and they wished to get the same

¹⁴⁶ Seneviratne-Rupasinghe, 'Negotiating Custom, Colonial Lawmaking in the Galle Landraad', 44.

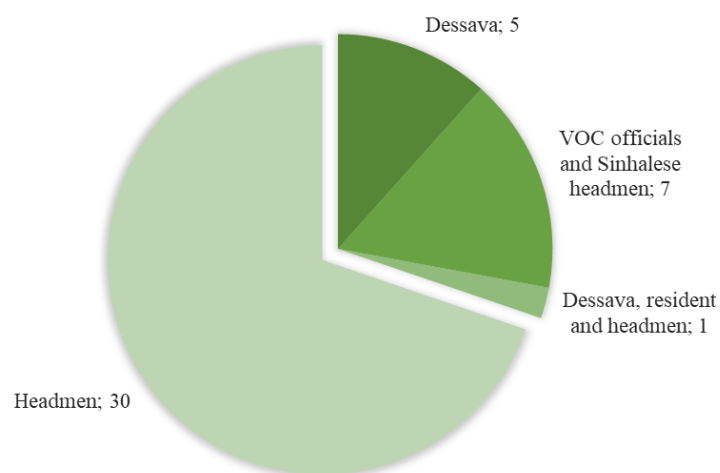
¹⁴⁷ Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment*, 3, 142.

¹⁴⁸ SNLA, 1/6542, 5 August 1790, Council minutes of the Matara council.

rights. The council of Ceylon decided to promise that they would be treated better and encouraged them to present their complaints in a decent way.¹⁴⁹

Table 3 shows that the largest part of the 1790 petitions was directed against (prominent) headmen. These documents are mainly petitions of one or more persons complaining about the injustice done to them by the elite. Often it was about a personal dispute and not about the trip to Badagiriya. Thus, people made use of the arrival of the investigators to hand in petitions, including cases that were already settled. The fourth investigating committee with mainly Landraad members suspected that the petitioners tried to get an advantageous outcome to already settled disputes.¹⁵⁰ The uprising in Matara created opportunities especially for minor headmen to strengthen their position. Like Madoegodde Appu and Don Simon arachchi, two of the self-appointed leaders Sluijsken met on 10 July 1790. Sluijsken persuaded them to join his side and offered them a higher position.¹⁵¹ Fretz already recommended appointing Don Simon as muhandiram of the Kandabodapattu, as the uprising in this pattu was the most prominent of all and Don Simon arachchi had authority in the Kandabodapattu as well in other areas.¹⁵² Madoegodde Appu was appointed as muhandiram of the guards in Galle.¹⁵³ Later on, Madoegodde Appu renounced his alliance and tried to stir the dessavony again.

Table 3: Accused official(s) per petition



Source: NA (NL), HR 595, petition no. 1-44. Petitions translated between 17 May 1790 and 14 June 1790.

¹⁴⁹ SLNA, 1/755, 12 July 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon.

¹⁵⁰ SNLA, 1/6763, 29 July 1790, Secret and separate letters from the special commission to Colombo, Galle and the outposts, f. 4.

¹⁵¹ Belt, 'Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794', 63.

¹⁵² NA (NL), HR 595, 11 June 1790, Notes of the meetings of the commissioners from the Ceylonese government.

¹⁵³ Belt, 'Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794', 65.

Not all people considered Madoegodde Appu their leader. The first time the investigators talked to him he was drunk and intimidated them with displaying his weapons. He said that he was voicing the protesters.¹⁵⁴ Afterwards, other headmen of the uprising dissociated themselves from him as he tried to drown them in sorrows and ruin their position. The minor headmen were afraid of talking to the investigators Samlant and Fretz because chances were high that then they would be seen as the initiators of a rebellion. The investigators decided to stroll among the thousands of gathered people and they talked to some of the headmen who dared to speak with them. Some insurgents besieged the investigators – because of rumours that had spread about military troops marching towards Hakmana – , yet the headmen calmed them.¹⁵⁵ So, it seems that the minor headmen were not planning to take up arms to wipe out Dutch presence.¹⁵⁶ A visit of Fretz and Samlant at a rest house portrays this. At the frontier of the Kandabodapattu these people from the Rada caste, who performed ritual services as their caste service, decorated the rest house with cloth, as was common when high-placed people visited the countryside. The Rada told that the lower headmen had ordered them to do so.¹⁵⁷ When the commission wanted to travel further after their visit to Hakmana they needed coolies to carry their belongings and themselves in a *palanquin*. The headmen, among others arachchi Don Simon, provided them with coolies, although it took some days before they had found enough coolies who wished to join the investigators.¹⁵⁸ Thus, the headmen did what was in their might to charm the investigators.

A revolution like the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) was probably also unthinkable among the minor headmen. In Haiti, the leaders of the enslaved did not ask for freedom, the most sweeping demands included a less intensive work week so they had time to work in their own gardens and the elimination of the whip.¹⁵⁹ It was beyond their imagination to end the (colonial) system. Individuals like rebel Madoegodde Appu or mahamudaliyar Nicolaas Dias might have attempted to overthrow the Dutch or at least strengthened their own position. The Kandyan Kingdom was still a place to flee to avoid punishment or hardships as well as a place to find allies for the people in the Dutch occupied parts of the island. A yearning for the old Kingdom seems to emerge only after the British forced back and eventually overthrew the Kandyan Kingdom. Often inhabitants of former Kandyan lands initiated these rebellions, large segments of low country people rose in revolt following a European defeat in Kandy (1603-1630, 1803).¹⁶⁰ Hence, anti-imperialist content or nostalgia for the old kingdom, Jayawardena writes about seems to be missing in 1790. The uprising did not violently confront or challenge the

¹⁵⁴SLNA, 1/755, 6 May 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon.

¹⁵⁵ NA (NL), 1.04.17, 596, 13 May 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

¹⁵⁶ In comparison to Madoegodde Appoe who according to Van den Belt shouted ‘Away with the Dutchmen’ (Van den Belt, *Het VOC-bedrijf op Ceylon*, 65) and constantly searched for allies in the Kandyan provinces and at the Kandyan court.

¹⁵⁷ NA (NL), 1.04.17, 596, 10 May 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

¹⁵⁸ NA (NL), 1.04.17, 596, 14 May 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

¹⁵⁹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 103.

¹⁶⁰ Channa Wickremesekera, *Kandy at War: Indigenous Military Resistance to European Expansion in Sri Lanka, 1594-1818* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004), 155–156; Jayawardena, *Perpetual Ferment*, 33.

political system. The protest was not intended ‘to destroy, or even radically alter, the political system or the social structure in which peasant or other subordinate groups operate. They have developed (...) responses to defend themselves against the excessive demands of dominant groups in the first instance, and, when the defences fail, to provide ways of protesting their exploitation without directly confronting their oppressors.’¹⁶¹ The majority of the insurgents actually searched more state intervention and, to borrow a phrase from John Chalcraft who looks at the actions of Egyptian peasants, the protesters ‘were appealing to the power of the centralized legal-administrative order to resolve local disputes and soften the exploitation generated by the village hierarchy and by political, economic, and social change.’¹⁶²

Obviously, not everyone in the Matara district joined the uprising or handed in petitions. Reports from 4 May 1790 show that inhabitants of the Magampattu declined the encouragement of the insurgents to join them. They stated ‘that they have never been as happy as now and thus did not want to have anything to do with a rebellion.’¹⁶³ When the investigators Fretz and Samlant arrived at the Weligama corle they met only one old servant of the mudaliyar who told them that all male inhabitants joined the resistance. Their women and children fled when they heard the sounds of the drums – the announcement of the arrival of the commission – because they thought military troops arrived. When the investigators later met the mobs and encouraged the people to send a delegation to Hakmana, the inhabitants of the Weligama corle wanted to be sure if it was safe to go to Hakmana and leave their wives and children behind.¹⁶⁴ It seems that only men took up arms, at least in the Weligama corle as women and children are only mentioned when it comes to this area.

Salagama and the prominent headmen are the significant absentees as petition writers, the petitioners comprise mainly of peasant-cultivators. Presumably, because the cinnamon peelers worked full time as cinnamon peelers for the VOC and would not have been ordered to go to Badagiriya. A group of cinnamon peelers who passed Hakmana to go into the Kandyan territories also did not join the uprising. The protesters stopped them, so they had to turn around and eventually found another road to reach the forest where they peeled wild cinnamon.¹⁶⁵ Some petitioners added their caste or occupation behind their names, but as Table 4 shows, petitioners also presented themselves only as inhabitants of a village, pattu or corle. It is interesting to see that not all writers identified themselves in the petitions as part of a caste group. In courtroom documents of the same period, scribes often wrote down the litigants’ and witnesses’ caste. This identification was part of the official documentation of the lawsuit. A (colonial) state is according to Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker a powerful identifier because it

¹⁶¹ Adas, ‘Comment’, 131.

¹⁶² Chalcraft, ‘Engaging the State’, 319.

¹⁶³ NA (NL), 1.04.17, 596, 4 May 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

¹⁶⁴ NA (NL), 1.04.17, 596, 7 May 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo.

¹⁶⁵ NA (NL), 1.04.17, 596, 5 June 1790, Letters from Fretz and Samlant to Colombo. In the Galle corle at Baddagama. on the other hand, the Salagama were involved. In July around two thousand cinnamon peelers gathered at the rest house of Baddagama and went daily into the Gangabodapattu of the Galle corle to stir up rebellion in the area.

has the material and symbolic resources to impose the categories.¹⁶⁶ However, self-understanding is another alternative for identity, this implies ‘one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act.’¹⁶⁷ The term ‘self-understanding’ emphasizes that the Self and group are bound by culturally specific forms rather than universal.¹⁶⁸ Table 4 gives an idea of the diversity of people handing in petitions, it represents the number of people understanding themselves as part of a caste group because not every petitioner identified with a group. In Chapters Three and Four, it becomes clear that some petitioners used their descent or position as part of their rhetoric.

Table 4: Self-identification petitioners

Position		Caste		Not specified	
Mayoral	11	Nainde	6	Minor castes	1
Vidane	3	Wahatje	3	Inhabitants of villages, pattus, and corles	16
Vidane arachchi	2	Coolie	3		
Corle arachchi	1	Lascorin	6		
Arachchi	9	Porowäkaraya	2		
Bitmeraal	2	Fisherman	2		
Minor headmen	3	Baddanas	1		
Kangān	3	Goyigama	1		
Appuhamy	2				
Writer	1				
Total	37	Total	24	Total	17

Source: NA (NL), HR 595, petition no. 1-44. Petitions translated between 17 May 1790 and 14 June 1790

I argue that the collectivity of the resistance was, in fact, significant, even though different layers of the society seem to be involved in the uprising and different interests were at stake. Striking and writing petitions seems to be a very conscious act of the disgruntled inhabitants of the Matara dessavony to draw attention to their grievances and the failing system of petitioning to the porta of the dessava. The limiting force of being colonised did not refrain the people from attracting the VOC officials into the countryside and towards rest houses. On the contrary, it generated political action and informed the ‘transformative agency’ of the peasants, to borrow a term from David Scott.¹⁶⁹ The disgruntled

¹⁶⁶ Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker, ‘Identity’, in *Colonialism in Question Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 72.

¹⁶⁷ Cooper and Brubaker, 73.

¹⁶⁸ Cooper and Brubaker, 71–76.

¹⁶⁹ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004), 111, via: Marina Carter and Nira Wickramasinghe, ‘Forcing the Archive: Involuntary Migrants “of Ceylon” in the Indian Ocean World of the 18–19th Centuries’, *South Asian History and Culture*, 2018, 9.

inhabitants exerted pressure on the VOC to get a response on their petitions. In my opinion, the second mandate-ola by Sluijsken is a remarkable example of the transformation the peasants initiated. Foremost, the first mandate-ola was not satisfying, so the insurgents stayed away from their houses, stirred the countryside, and sometimes switched to violence. What is more, they requested the VOC officials to look into the matters again! The protesters pointed at their neglected wishes and asked for a specification of the actions Samlant and Fretz promised to take too. Thus, Sluijsken had to rewrite the first mandate-ola to ease the people. Moreover, it is significant that due to the uprising and petitioning everyone was dismissed from compulsory work at the dam in Badagiryra, while before, individual protests – mainly by fleeing – were severely punished. Concluding, one could say that although the protesters and petitioners cannot be described as a ‘united front’, their collective resistance had the possibility to change a situation, or at least resulted in attention for their cases. In the next chapter, the attention moves from using the body as a tool of resistance to petitions as negotiation tools.

2.5 Conclusion

The right to get a fair judgment and the possibility to submit complaints seems to be the peasants’ motivation to protest, as the regular procedure of providing petitions – an often used village defence mechanism – to both the headmen as the *dessava* failed.¹⁷⁰ With petitioning and striking, the communities in the Matara district tried to challenge elite and Company demands on village production and manpower. Some petitioners feared for their lives, as they were ordered to go to Badagiryra, others had a deep wish that their miserable situation changed. As noted in this chapter, the rest house became a place protesters gathered and brought forward complaints, requests, and petitions to the visiting investigators. A rest house was, besides a ‘small representation of the VOC authority’¹⁷¹, also a village meeting place.¹⁷² In all, the collective resistance had transformative agency, greatly neglected in historiography thus far. The uprising attracted Landraad members into the interior and gave peasant-cultivators the opportunity to bring forward their complaints. Some petitioners also had personal disputes in which they wished the VOC judiciary to engage with. This was possible as the representatives of the Landraad travelled to rest houses. Most importantly, everyone was dismissed from working in Badagiryra against their will, one of the main motivations to strike conveyed in the petitions.

¹⁷⁰ The failure of the regular procedure was also one of the reasons the inhabitants of villages in the Maritime Provinces of recently occupied Sri Lanka by the British in 1797 brought forward about their resistance. After the arrival of the English Company they still got the opportunity of referring their complaints to Goyigama chiefs, but from a certain moment the British replaced their chiefs with foreigners. The people valued the opportunity to share their complaints, but only in the way they were used to. They rebelled ‘as a last resort, once petitions, dialogues, and meetings had all failed.’ Wickramasinghe, ‘Many Little Revolts or One Rebellion?’, 178–79, 188.

¹⁷¹ Belt, *Het VOC-bedrijf op Ceylon*, 144, 275.

¹⁷² The Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v., ‘Ambalam (n.)’, accessed 2 January 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ambalam>.

Chapter Three: The rhetoric in the petitions

*We continue to subdue ourselves to inform you about our case, (...) we request you very persistently and humble to share one and another with the very noble and respectable lord Governor of Ceylon and that on these our complaints a proper investigation will be started and that on our complaints a settlement will follow. We pray if you will forgive us with the love of God if in our complaints any errors occur.*¹⁷³

As has been noted in the first two chapters, the VOC officials encouraged the protesters to switch to writing petitions and requests. It was only through this medium, their complaints would be heard. The sentences of the petition quoted above suggest supplication. The format of petitions in British Company-era Bombay Prashant Kidambi researches is familiar to documents of supplication in other historical contexts. What he notices is also visible in the largest number of petitions from Matara, 1790. These documents usually begin with an obligatory salutation to the official the petition was addressed to, followed by a narrative outlining the grievances of the writer(s) and a claim for their restitution or settlement. The petitions often end with a concluding statement of trust in the investigation of the addressee and rectification of the wrongs done to the petitioner(s). However, ‘within these constraints, (...) supplicants had some room for manoeuvre in presenting their case to the ruling authorities.’¹⁷⁴ For instance, offering supplication to an overlord, followed by a quest for patronage or protection in return. In some petitions, writers recalled past services to the addressee or government while seeking justice in the present. Supplicants also appealed on ‘customs’ to stop the state from seizing their goods.¹⁷⁵

In this chapter, I explore the rhetoric of the forty-four petitions to gain insight into how the petitioners presented the Self and the Other, how they reconceptualized their relationship with the colonial officials they addressed and the ways the petitioners reconsidered and rewrote pasts and how they conceptualized their relationship to their addressees. The petition passed to investigators Van Schuler and De Vos on 21 April 1790 will occur a couple of times in this chapter, beginning with the introductory citation. It addressed the history of the VOC in Sri Lanka, until the moment of rupture: the repeating decree to work in Badagiriya.¹⁷⁶ This chapter starts with the collective memory of Badagiriya as a place and the role it played in the rhetoric of the petitions.

3.1 *Badagiriya in the collective memory*

The place Badagiriya appears in 25% of the petitions. The petitioners wrote that Company officials and prominent headmen forced them to work at the water reservoir, that they were undeservedly convicted

¹⁷³ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 3.

¹⁷⁴ Kidambi, ‘The Petition as Event: Colonial Bombay, circa 1889–1914’, 209.

¹⁷⁵ Kidambi, 208–9.

¹⁷⁶ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 3. The Dutch and my translation into English is printed in Appendix II.

to Badagiriya, and that the working conditions in Badagiriya were life-threatening. In five of the petitions, the origin of the place is written down. The inhabitants of the Matara district wrote: ‘In former ages, deep in the rough countryside of Ruhana was a king who had his residence there. It was under his watch that giants with amazing strength dammed a tank over there.’¹⁷⁷ Eleven representatives of the minor headmen and inhabitants of the Matara dessavony wrote in another petition that the tank was constructed during the reign of the first king of the island.¹⁷⁸ Yet other petitioners called this king ‘the great king of these provinces’.¹⁷⁹ The inhabitants of the Magampattu, the region in which the tank was located, named the king who ordered the construction of the dam in Badagiriya, king Dutugemunu. When the dam was finished, the aforementioned king devoted this dam to ‘the temple’. Close to the Badagiriya tank, is a temple, the Bandagiriya Rajamaha Viharaya. This might explain the name of the tank and the reference to the temple in the last petition.¹⁸⁰ (Figure 5)

The petitioners might all refer to Dutugemunu, the Sinhalese prince from the province of Ruhuna, as the initiator of the tank. In 161 B.C. he campaigned against Elara, a Tamil prince who invaded the kingdom of Rajarata. Eventually, Dutugemunu defeated Elara in single combat when both men were seated on top of an elephant. Sinhalese folklore emphasized Dutugemunu’s great personal heroism during his fight to recapture Anuradhapura. Dutugemunu became the first Sinhalese king who reigned over a united island from Anuradhapura.¹⁸¹ The battle between these men is one of the most celebrated moments in Sri Lankan history, even in the twenty-first century. Fans of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, presiding over the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in May 2009, call him ‘a modern-day incarnation of King Dutugemunu’.¹⁸² Michael Roberts points at the demonization of ‘threatening others’, like the Tamils, in epic tales, war poems, and onomastic folklore in his research on the 1590s to 1815. Europeans were often associated with Tamil invaders, like Elara.¹⁸³ The 1790 petitions are a completely different genre, but these testimonies also show knowledge among the writers about Dutugemunu and his activities in the region.

In the countryside, pathways provided circuits of cultural transmission. Its travellers shared war poems, stories of the victory stories of famous kings as Dutugemunu, Rajasinha I and II, astrological

¹⁷⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 2, ‘In vroegere eeuwen heeft diep in het woeste landschap van Roene een koning zijn residentie gehad dewelke aldaar een tank door reusen die geweldigen kragten hadden, heeft laeten afdammen.’

¹⁷⁸ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 3.

¹⁷⁹ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 5, §19, ‘de groote koning deezer gewesten’.

¹⁸⁰ The name Bandagiriya (connected rock) is believed to be derived from the two rock outcrops beside the Badagiriya rock that are connected.

¹⁸¹ Paul E. Schellinger, Robert M. Salkin, and K. A. Berney, *International Dictionary of Historic Places*, vol. Vol. 5: Asia and Oceania (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1996), 35.

¹⁸² Lydia Polgreen, ‘Justifying a Costly War in Sri Lanka’, *The New York Times*, 18 July 2009, sec. Asia Pacific, <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/07/19/world/asia/19lanka.html>.

¹⁸³ Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period*, 133; Michael Roberts, ‘The Collective Consciousness of the Sinhalese During the Kandyan Era: Manichean Images, Associational Logic’, *Asian Ethnicity* 3, no. 1 (2002): 29–30.

information, messages and more. According to Roberts, temples and the *ambalam* (wayside resting sheds) were sites of cultural production and transmission. People walked great distances, to perform rajakariya, fight in wars, visit shrines and ceremonies, and go on pilgrimages. Although travelling went slow due to the absence of roads and the mountainous terrain, it did not prevent journeys along footpaths girded by the aforementioned ambalam.¹⁸⁴ It seems that not only the inhabitants of the Magampattu, where Badagiriya was situated, knew of the king who decreed on constructing a dam in Badagiriya, but that the story had either reached the whole dessavony or was already deeply embedded in the society.

Thus, the petitioners put themselves in a historical framework. The place Badagiriya was part of the collective memory of the people of the Matara dessavony, as well as stories about the first ruler of a united island, Dutugemunu. In one petition it is men mentioned that before the Portuguese period, the dam broke down and the area became unsuitable for sowing, from that moment the jungle took over.¹⁸⁵ Badagiriya as a place initiated both fear and resistance and this was appropriated by the petitioners. In former times, Badagiriya was already dismissed, so it would only cost human lives and equipment if the Company continued going there, the petitioners tried to circumvent working there. Following anthropologist Ranjini Obeyesekere, Roberts argues that through stories and the fragments of mythic events, such as stories related to the island's history or its special place in Buddha's vision, the people came to develop a Sinhalese 'historical self-consciousness'.¹⁸⁶ These particular petitions show a sense of 'knowing one's place in the world.' Not only stories of centuries ago, but also of the Kandyan domination of the island and their kin's lands must have been shared. Inhabitants of the Magampattu seemed to have vivid memories of the time before the conquest of their pattu by the Dutch. For instance, they wrote that less than forty years ago, they only paid half an amuna otu for an amuna to the king and consequently requested to be released from the heavier taxes by the Dutch.¹⁸⁷



Figure 5: The newly renovated stupa and the age-old one remaining at the top of Badagiriya temple, picture by Indika De Silva.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁴ Roberts, 'The Collective Consciousness of the Sinhalese During the Kandyan Era: Manichean Images, Associational Logic', 35–36; Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period*, 113.

¹⁸⁵ NA (NL), HR 595, 24–27 May 1790, petition no. 2, §3.

¹⁸⁶ Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period*, 28.

¹⁸⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 8, §5.

¹⁸⁸ Krishani Peiris, 'In Search of Bandagiriya', *Explore Sri Lanka* (blog), 31 July 2014, <http://exploresrilanka.lk/2014/08/in-search-bandagiriya/>.

3.2 *Reconsidering and rewriting the past*

In petitions to the Madras government in India during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Aparna Balachandran notices descriptions of early relationships between the East India Company and the petitioners. The latter presented that past as if the British East India Company needed the assistance of the petitioners.¹⁸⁹ In the first Matara petition, written only a couple days after the start of the turbulence, references to a harmonious past can be found as well. It was to this past the petitioners longed. After giving compliments to their addressee, the noble and honourable lord Commander of Galle and Matara, the petitioners wrote about the one-sidedness of the early relationship between king Rajasinha II and the Dutch East India Company:

During the rule of his majesty the king of Kandy, Rajasinha [II] when he wished to take this land from the hands of the Portuguese and hand it over to the Dutchmen and after receiving his majesty's highest commands, were the Portuguese expelled with help of both the Dutchmen and the king's subjects. Afterwards, the former rights of the king are again interiorized and attributed, without any changes, according to the treaty, and the Dutchmen became entitled to the low lands. Hereupon many years have peacefully passed thanks to the maintenance and delight of all the privileges that have priory been custom, but since the Dutchmen have appointed (...) servants at the porta who commit injustice [and] (...) the noble lord [Van Angelbeek] started his government all the inhabitants, big and small, men and women, without any distinction, in corles and pattus of the dessavony have suffered many punishments, pain, sorrows, disadvantages, and injustices.¹⁹⁰

In this petition, the Dutch occupation of the coastal provinces is presented as a gesture from the Kandyan king. The VOC observed this grant well, up until the violation of the treaty by dessava Van Angelbeek and unjust porta servants.

During the Portuguese period, a similar event as the drawing of the treaty was incorporated in the rhetoric of a petition to convince the Portuguese colonial power to respect the distinction between castes. Sinhalese people conveyed their grievances to the Portuguese captain-general Diogo de Melo de Castro (1636-1638). The Portuguese did not observe the Sinhalese laws and customs, as they had promised in the person of captain-general Jerónimo de Azevedo when the Portuguese took over de kingdom of Kotte at an assembly held at Malvana in 1597. T.B.H. Abeysinghe looked into the presumed existence of this convention and concludes that a simple ceremony at Colombo in 1597 became an anchor of the people's rights. He notes that chances are high that either the collective memory of the people played a trick with them or they invented this convention forty years after the alleged event.

¹⁸⁹ Balachandran, 'Petitions, the City, and the Early Colonial State in South India', 169.

¹⁹⁰ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 3.

Abeysinghe regards the latter as most plausible. The myth-making was a protective device of the subjects of Kotte against the uneasiness they experienced, according to Abeysinghe.¹⁹¹

Following Natalie Zemon Davis and Aparna Balachandran, I understand the historical imagination not as fraud, but as the narrativization of moral truth by the petitioners.¹⁹² According to Balachandran 'fictive' elements in early colonial petitions, like the involvement of custom, provide us with insights into the worlds of the ordinary men and women, although it is filtered by their engagement with the law. In South India, the rhetoric of custom was central to the British East India Company's legal regime. The legitimacy of ruling the coastal provinces drew on the commitment of the Company to upholding age-old practices. Petitioners tried to prove that their claims had a sanction of past practice. According to them, the long existence of the customary practice made it righteous.¹⁹³ Balachandran, therefore, considers the main challenge for the petitioners to 'convincingly describe an ideal past where the custom they wished the state to legitimize and uphold was common practice.'¹⁹⁴ In numerous Matara petitions, old customs or practices of former years are covered. In the first petition, translated above, the harmonious ideal past is introduced. Often, the petitioners were more explicit and pointed back at times with lower taxes, more free days, respect for caste and position, and fewer family members who were obliged to perform services.

Violation of the ascribed services and treatment of positions and castes is a recurring theme in the petitions. Sluijsken concluded that this happened as a result of the ignorance of laws and customs of the Sinhalese people.¹⁹⁵ Some petitioners explicitly asked for a new *dessava*, whereas the inhabitants of the Magampattu asked for the replacement of the 'white man' of their *pattu*. Since the VOC took over their *pattu* the head of the *pattu* had always been a Sinhalese man, instead of someone who did not understand their language and asked unusual work from people from the Goyigama caste, Karava, Durāva, and Rada caste. The 'white man' (probably resident Brinkman) ordered people from the *pattu* to work at Badagiriya to plant gardens, construct rest houses, clean the high of the dam. Many of them became sick and the inhabitants who were not sent to Badagiriya had to transport all kinds of goods to that place. They complained that they had to present many *pehindoes* (pre-cooked food), chickens, and butter to the resident. Moreover, they got never time to rest.¹⁹⁶

Another example of the invocation of past and custom is the complaint by the mayorals and elephant hunters from the area among the rest houses of the Giruwayapattu. In the old days, the mayorals, elephant hunters and Salagama were free from supplying the 'gerechtigheid' on tobacco gardens and salt marshes, and their cattle were not taxed. At the moment of writing the petition, only

¹⁹¹ T. B. H. Abeysinghe, 'Myth of Malvana Convention', *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies* 7 (1964): 70–72.

¹⁹² Balachandran, 'Petitions, the City, and the Early Colonial State in South India', 166–67.

¹⁹³ Balachandran, 165–167.

¹⁹⁴ Balachandran, 166.

¹⁹⁵ SLNA, 1/755, 5 August 1790, Secret Minutes of the Council of Ceylon.

¹⁹⁶ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 8, §1-2.

the Salagama were granted that privilege.¹⁹⁷ Another illustrative case is of the lascorins who asked for being on duty only every third month, as was the custom.¹⁹⁸ What is more, people from the Goyigama caste complained about being ordered to perform the service of cinnamon peeling, which was formerly a task of lower castes.¹⁹⁹ Finally, the officials imposed extraordinary body-tax on drummers and grasscutters, these people asked for the abolishment of this tax. Sluijsken accepted this request in the second mandate-ola and promised that their services would coincide with their birth and traditional practices.²⁰⁰ The past was, however, not always ideal; the arachchis, mayorals, lascorins, *naindes*, coolies and other minor castes of the Four Baygams wrote: ‘in former years [they] suffered from [their] own headmen, but not from others as happens at the moment.’²⁰¹ Probably they talked about the European officials because in following statements in their petition they addressed the headmen, who had never exploited them as much as they did at the moment.²⁰²

Rewriting the past and reconsidering the relationship with the VOC was useful to flatter and convince the addressees. However, the petitioners would not have written the officials if they did not expect the Company to intervene in their advantage. Petitioners appealed to the power of the VOC for resolving local disputes and soften the misbehaviour of the *dessava* and the exploitation generated by village hierarchy and by political, economic, and social change. What is more, writers petitioning for personal cases often requested an investigation of the wrongs done to them by prominent headmen and announced their trust in the fair colonial officials. In a request, Joean Wietetoege called on the ‘credible books’ of the ‘white lords’ (*thombos*) in which could be found that his family had leased out their *paraveni* fields, which he now wished to cultivate himself.²⁰³ Broewewille Wioeonge asked, among other petitioners, to get compensation for the (financial) sufferings he experienced, wrote that he was falsely accused by the *baddecorn* of being in severe debt and the *dessava* subsequently chose to dismiss him from his office. Broewewille asked also for a restoration of his office as *kangan*.²⁰⁴ All these petitions evoke a certain kind of negotiation with the practice and discourse of the VOC.

3.3 *Imagining the Self and the Other*

The inhabitants of the Matara *dessavony* constructed a Self and an Other and described their relationship with their addressees in the petitions. Often the petitioners addressed commander Sluijsken, Governor Van de Graaff or members of the investigation committee. The arrival of the *dessava* and other ‘white

¹⁹⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 7-8 June 1790, petition no. 5, §6.

¹⁹⁸ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluijsken, f. 33, article 1.

¹⁹⁹ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §12.2. See Chapter 4.

²⁰⁰ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluijsken, f. 59, article 50.

²⁰¹ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 11, §2, ‘Ten tweeden zijn wij in vroegere tijden door onze eijge hoofden gequeld geworden doch niet door anderen zodanig als het tans geschied.’

²⁰² NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 11, §6.

²⁰³ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 35.

²⁰⁴ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 39.

lords' and the extortion by his local counterparts changed the situation for the peasant cultivators for the worse. They had become a victim of the Other: the exploiting headmen and *dessava*. The headmen not only used the peasants to enlarge their own wealth, but they also exploited the peasants to spawn the *dessava*.²⁰⁵ It is striking that the petitioners act like they internalized a form of inferiority to the colonial authorities. Actually, they appealed strategically for the paternal instincts of the latter to arise sympathy for their situation. I also notice that by the invocation of customary rights and the narratives of loss the petition writers made use of the figure of the just ruler and appealed for the moral nature of the VOC.²⁰⁶ The final part of the first petition illustrates this tendency; just after the petitioners introduced the trip to Badagiriya and the circulating stories of sickness and death, they wrote:

After we heard this command, of which we could not think something else than [it being] a danger to our own lives, being informed and even having seen the condition of the ones coming back, we are very scared to go to such a place. Because of this, we envisioned trusting all this to just judges to receive fair justice. With this in mind, the minor headmen and all the inhabitants of this *dessavony* came together, without any intention to resist against the noble Company or to inflict any disadvantage to the lords' powers in this land.²⁰⁷

Many petitions about the trip to Badagiriya present the work there as life-threatening. In another petition, the writers asked for being released from the trip as it would eventually depopulate the whole country, therefore they profoundly called upon commander Sluijsken for an investigation and justice.²⁰⁸

In more than a dozen petitions, the inhabitants defined themselves as 'poor people' who needed the protection of the Company from exploitation, corruption or disproportionate taxes. Petitioners depicted themselves as faithful and humble servants committed to justice and order, the cultivation of the land, and the remission of taxes. Several petitions start with the description of the work the petitioners had done from the moment the 'white lords' ruled the country. The mayorals of the Wellabodapattu write elaborately about their work and services containing, among others, building rest houses and a school for the 'white and black lords' and Dutch church ministers, planting many gardens for the Company in different areas and villages and delivering goods for the visiting colonial officials. Still, the VOC did not value it enough and they had to do extra work, donate cows, and deliver their fruit that they needed for their own maintenance.²⁰⁹

Many of the personal petitions started with declaring loyalty to the Company like the conclusion of the petition quoted at the beginning of this chapter. If all petitioners put their asserted loyalty in

²⁰⁵ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 2, §5. The *mudaliyar* of the Gangabodapattu and second translator forced peasants to give more annual gifts (*pingos*) so they were able to present this to the *dessava*. The other headmen subsequently could not stay behind and this put a lot of pressure on the peasants.

²⁰⁶ Kidambi, 'The Petition as Event: Colonial Bombay, circa 1889–1914', 226; Chalcraft, 'Engaging the State', 304.

²⁰⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 3.

²⁰⁸ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 2, §3.

²⁰⁹ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 18.

practice is questionable. It is plausible that at least some of the petitioners tried to present themselves a little better to the VOC. Van Angelbeek questioned the loyalty of, for instance, the accused Naranderije, arachchi from the Hakuru. Naranderije described himself as a loyal servant of the Company, who only left his compulsory labour to celebrate the Sinhalese New Year in his village. When he, later on, was ordered to go to Badagiriya, he could not return because he was sick and he requested to be released from false accusations on him. Van Angelbeek was aware of this case and accused Naranderije of misbehaviour.²¹⁰ Another example of acclaimed loyalty is found in the petition against the *sabandar* of the inhabitants of Midigama, who told the *dessava* that his people had joined the insurgency. A month before the Sinhalese New Year the decree was sent out to get ready for Badagiriya, in the meantime, their *sabandar* took the inhabitants of Midigama to his fields and let them cultivate it. He also ordered their brothers and sons labour for the Company, even though already one person from a family worked for him. The *sabandar* arrested their women and children if they did not deliver enough areca nuts, cut down vital trees and took buffaloes and cows from poor inhabitants. Moreover, some people released themselves from going to Badagiriya by bribing the *sabandar*. When the others complained about all this, he suggested they rather join the uprising. The forty inhabitants who signed the petition stated, however, that they were loyal to the Company and asked the VOC for help.²¹¹

The Matara petitions evoked not only passivity or subversion, some petitioners actually adopted a tone of transaction. Bhavani Raman notices this in the Madras petitions too; the idea of transaction resonated broadly in the eighteenth century in South India as it derived from the idea of labour and hierarchical reciprocity.²¹² Raman introduces in this context Mohandas Gandhi's notion of 'love-force'. Petitioners backed their petitions by force, 'in the sense that petitioners would withdraw their consent to be ruled in the name of a higher justice if their demands were not accepted.'²¹³ The inhabitants from the Magampattu also declared that if the Company continued imposing uncommon services, they saw no other option than leaving their farms. Several people already left for the 'King's land' after they heard that many labourers caught the diarrheal disease and other diseases in Badagiriya.²¹⁴ Woodcutters from the Goyigama caste complained about their *kangan* who did not respect the distinction their caste brought them. They requested another *kangan*, otherwise, they were compelled to migrate to a place they do not experience all these injustices.²¹⁵ Thus, the petitioners threatened with collective withdrawal.

A remarkable and under-researched feature in the rhetoric of a couple of Matara petitions is the emphasis on the disadvantages of the current situation for the petitioners *and* the Company. The petitions evoke a sense of shared interest and common vision. The work in Badagiriya was not beneficial for the

²¹⁰ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 32.

²¹¹ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 16.

²¹² Raman, 'Civil Address and the Early Colonial Petition in Madras', 132.

²¹³ Mohandas Gandhi, *Gandhi: 'Hind Swaraj' and Other Writings*, Anthony J. Parel (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 85, via: Raman, 130.

²¹⁴ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 8.

²¹⁵ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 28. For more see Chapter Four.

Company as the place was not suitable for living, it was dangerous, sickening and remote. Petitioners reasoned often that the work on plantations with barren soil or during the wrong season meant less income for the VOC and was a disadvantage for themselves too. In the lengthy petition of 17 May 1790, the inhabitants of the Matara dessavony complained about the newly appointed unskilled overseers on plantations, who let them work on cinnamon, coffee, pepper, areca nuts plantations, without reasoning and any advantage of the VOC. The appuhamu also let the inhabitants work on their own plantations.²¹⁶ What is more, the minor headmen of the elephant hunters pointed at the wishes of the dessava to catch as many elephants as possible, which resulted in life-threatening situations for the hunters, but as many elephants died because of a lack of water and food, the Company also lost profit.²¹⁷

As noted earlier, the petitioners sometimes presented themselves as part of a caste group or having an occupation or position. Caste is a reoccurring theme in the petitions.²¹⁸ In Sri Lanka, caste was used as an instrument of governance and this did not change after the conquest (of parts) of the island by Europeans. The Dutch enforced the systems of compulsory labour-based and penal regulations on caste; the (adopted) religion of the colonised was irrelevant to this system.²¹⁹ Many researchers have indicated caste as a social construct that changes over time, but the petitioners clung to the advantages of their caste.²²⁰ In the Malvana petition to the Portuguese, the people already complaining that the low and the higher castes were sometimes treated with equality – with equal contempt that is. They wrote: ‘today they made us *farezes* (a low caste, who carry andors and palanquins).’²²¹ Before moving on to the fourth chapter, it is important to point at the possibility that the petitioners evoked caste to speak on the same terms as the VOC, as the Company valued castes in their judiciary. (Chapter 2.3) Moreover, the disrespect of distinctions between castes put the legitimacy of the colonial rule into question.

3.4 Conclusion

Coming to a conclusion, petitions were not only a powerful device for the colonial authorities to discipline the colonised population, but also a persuasive mechanism appropriated by the inhabitants of the Matara dessavony. It is remarkable how the content of the petitions shows the agency and negotiation of the inland population of the Matara district. The petitioners present themselves as humble and dependent subjects, who needed to be protected from exploiting headmen and VOC officials. Hence, the rhetoric emerges from the petitions that the colonial state should protect the writers against the Other. Some petitioners even threatened with withdrawal of their consent, if the Company refrained from

²¹⁶ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §4.

²¹⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 5, §7.

²¹⁸ In the next chapter, the moral truths and distinction between people the petitions convey will be looked at.

²¹⁹ Sumit Guha, *Beyond Caste Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 65.

²²⁰ See for example, Guha, *Beyond Caste Identity and Power in South Asia, Past and Present*; Nira Wickramasinghe and Alicia Schrikker, ‘The Ambivalence of Freedom: Slaves in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, n.d., 1–23.

²²¹ Abeysinghe, ‘Myth of Malvana Convention’, 72.

accommodating to certain requests. Petitioners pointed back at the times before the ‘white lords’ invaded the island and the period right after when the VOC still observed the Sinhalese laws and customs. What is more, the petitioners made appeals on ideas of equity and the legitimacy of the VOC on the island. They used history and historical rights to convince the colonial state to legitimize or uphold a custom, common practice, or another wish. The ambalam contributed to the circulation of (hi)stories about Badagiriya, king Dutugamunu, rights, and customs.

Chapter Four: The lived experience of colonialism

*We have to do all these services according to custom, but above this all we are presently suppressed with clandestine duties, as during the six months we are fishing at the sea, we have to press 3000 medida coconut oil, supply wood from coconut trees for the lime kiln and catch up the necessary furniture for the rest houses and above all do all the aforementioned services in the villages.*²²²

A handful of the 1790 petitions start with a short introduction on the work, services, and taxes the petitioners provided, followed by complaints, often about additional services and taxes. The fishermen and other inhabitants of the fishing village Dondra wrote the above-cited complaint against the headmen of the Wellabodapattu and other headmen who suppressed them. The ‘aforementioned services’ contained transporting goods from the river Nilwala Ganga to the Koggala Lake, shipping European officials and local headmen by river, delivering coconut oil, paying body-tax, providing bark leash for Kandyan embassies, collecting stones for the lime kiln, shipping the lime and providing pathways with necessary torches as the ‘white lords’ pass and return.²²³ (Figure 6) Although the waterfront activities of the Karava in coastal Sri Lanka has been investigated before, the petition shows the side of the intensive extraction of goods from Sri Lanka by the Dutch.²²⁴



Figure 6: Cut-out of: Jan Brandes, *Dhonies* in the bay of Galle on 20 January 1786. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. NG-1985-7-2-103.

²²² NA (NL), HR 595, 14 June 1790, petition no. 44, ‘onder alle welke beezigheeden die wij volgens gebruik moeten verrigten, worden wij boven dien thans door verscheide ongeoorlofde verpligtingen onderdrukt, als: in de ses maanden tijd wanner wij na de zee tot de visvangst kunnen gaan, 300 medieden klappus olij te perzen tot de kalk oven klapperhoud doen bezorgen en de noodige meubelen ten diesnte der rusthuijsen laet halen, en booven dien ook alle voorvallende diensten in t dorp laaten verrigten’

²²³ NA (NL), HR 595, 14 June 1790, petition no. 44.

²²⁴ Wagenaar, *Galle, VOC-Vestiging in Ceylon.*, 164–76; Michael Roberts, *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation the Rise of a Karāva Elite in Sri Lanka, 1500-1931* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

So, in this last chapter, the experience of colonialism is based on the present the petitioners described. I would say that since the peasants wanted to change their current situation, the description of the present comes closest to the lived experience of colonialism. This gives insight into the daily lives of people living under colonial rule. Still, not all petitions start with an elaborate description of the daily activities, but it remains possible to piece together fragments of lives and morals. The forty-four petitions mainly reveal moments of disruption in the slow rhythm of the peasants' life.

4.1 *Encounters with colonial officials*

Once awhile Company officials entered the peasants' terrain for commercial, administrative, and military purposes. They stayed overnight in the ambalam, small rest houses located by the road. Peasant-cultivators had to sustain travellers on their journey with the pehindoos and *adukkus* (pre-cooked food). Furthermore, decorating rest houses costed a lot of energy and money, wrote petitioners in 1790. In the Kandyan Kingdom, the Rada caste furnished white cloth to decorate the Sinhalese dessava's house and rest houses, as they were entitled to this by custom.²²⁵ The VOC officials awaited a similar tradition as it was a habit that when people of distinction travelled the country the villagers decorated rest houses. Petitioners are quite specific about the decoration and costs of the visit from the dessava, it required even more hustle than a visit from Governor of the island! The rest house for dessava Van Angelbeek had to be furnished with several kinds of (rare) cloth, arches of honour, and flowers. When he went on a long trip into the Giruwayapattu, Van Angelbeek's entourage contained European men and women, local headmen and hundreds of servants. The villagers wrote that the wishes of the dessava and his extensive entourage caused them troubles and financial harm.²²⁶

Another reason for a journey of the dessava into the hinterland was the elephant hunt. The vidane, mudaliyars, collective minor headmen of the elephant hunters and the collective inhabitants of the villages belonging to the rest houses of the Giruwayapattu complained about the long and, therefore, expensive stay of the current dessava and his entourage. The petitioners described a past when there were one or two elephant hunts a year and the dessava only was present when the hunters turned the elephants in the enclosure and left the next day for Matara again. (Figure 7) Van Angelbeek, however, arrived unannounced with a big entourage, resided close to the gateway and ordered the catch of elephants, under penalty of deportation as the elephant hunters did not succeed. The minor headmen wrote that out of fear for punishment they initiated two hunts in the last three months, which ended with the death of many of the 365 caught elephants as they were not able to provide enough water and food

²²⁵ John D'Oyly, 'A Sketch of the Constitution of the Kandyan Kingdom', *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 3, no. 2 (1833): 211; 'Ceylon', *Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British and Foreign India, China and Australasia* 8 (1832): 204.

²²⁶ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §10, NA (NL), HR 595, 7-8 June 1790, petition no. 5, §13.

for these animals to survive. The hard work, the penalties, and the death of elephants harmed both the VOC and the elephant hunters.²²⁷

The many journeys to the hinterland of the present dessava, Van Angelbeek, put a lot of pressure on the people, argued also the petitioners in the petition of 17 May 1790. It was common that the dessava and his entourage travelled through the Matara dessavony to inspect the district, receive gifts from the inhabitants and look at the elephant hunt. The former dessavas made fewer journeys and investigation commissions, formerly done by ‘ordinary’ appuhamu were, currently done by European servants, mudaliyars and muhandirams. Subsequently, the minor headmen were asked to deliver more presents to the visiting officials.²²⁸ However, Van Angelbeek denounced the complaints arguing that the headmen and the other inhabitants probably must have been afraid that the dessava discovered their corrupt activities. Moreover, it is part of his duty as a land regent to visit his servants, he proclaimed.²²⁹



Figure 7: Jan Brandes, Observation post. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. NG-1985-7-2-100. *The hut constructed of bamboo from which the party saw the hunted elephants pass by, over the cleared path in which men had laid the post ready and dug holes in order to raise the fence after the elephants would have passed; in the wood at Jaëlle near the elephant corral.* (Translation: De Bruijn and Raben, *The World of Jan Brandes*, 277)

²²⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 7-8 June 1790, petition no. 5, §7.

²²⁸ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §8.

²²⁹ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §8.

In several petitions, the journeys of other Company officials got covered too. A consistent frustration of the inhabitants was the increasing costs the minor headmen had to make for these travels. According to VOC regulations, the headmen should provide pre-cooked food, like rice, vegetables, limes, and eggs, to the VOC officials on their duty travels. From the *Plakkaatboeken* it becomes clear headmen misused these deliveries to confiscate more than was needed for a certain visit.²³⁰ Also in 1790, mudaliyars obliged inhabitants to present more pehindoes than necessary when the governor and other persons of distinction travelled through the dessavony.²³¹ The mayorals of the Four Baygams, moreover, needed to provide pehindoes and adukkus when the mudaliyar of the Wellabodapattu and the muhandiram of the Kandabodapattu arrived, but they did not have enough naindes and coolies to provide for such visits, as the demand was high.²³² So, people petitioned to get the former regulation back that only the common pehindoes and adukkus had to be delivered.

Thus, the investigated petitions show that the inhabitants of the Matara dessavony came into contact with VOC officials on several occasions. Some might only have heard of a visit, as they had to provide food or decoration, while many might have seen the dessava and his entourage on their travels. Other officials could be on investigation trips or for registration of the thombo. The tours of the dessava and other officials, on the other hand, also gave the inhabitants the possibility to hand in requests and petitions, as mentioned earlier in this thesis. The yearly visits of church ministers to churches and schools in the hinterland kept the Christian presence alive, despite their ruinous state, argues Andrew Spicer.²³³ The mudaliyars of the Wellabodapattu wrote that they erected rest houses and schools for the church ministers and inspectors and supplied adukku and pehindoes to them, even though this was already discarded.²³⁴ I would argue that the visits of a church minister, besides the sheds and houses serving as schools or churches, were yet another visual reminder of colonial domination. Just like inspection visits of the governor, dessava, or other (local) Company officials.

4.2 *Caste and social honour*

In the historiography of Sri Lanka, it is widely accepted that the Goyigama caste was at the top of the Sri Lankan caste hierarchy. However, the majority of the inland population was part of the Goyigama caste. Dewasiri points at the curious puzzle this brings forth: the top of the caste hierarchy being much larger than the bottom. Within the castes, there was a hierarchy as well, with mudaliyars, muhandirams, koralas, and arachchis. The chiefs in the top ranks did not give themselves any caste identity, let alone a Goyigama identity. On the village level, the Goyigama caste enjoyed part of the social honour of

²³⁰ Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, II:541-542, no. 371, 22 July 1747.

²³¹ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 54, article 29-30.

²³² NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 11.

²³³ Andrew Spicer, 'Dutch Churches in Asia', in *Parish Churches in the Early Modern World*, ed. Andrew Spicer (Ashgate Publishing, Limited, 2016), 349.

²³⁴ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 18.

subordinate castes. The colonial intervention did not break the traditional caste hierarchy, but it opened opportunities for minor castes to become more economically and politically powerful and compete for higher ritual status.²³⁵ Many petitioners of 1790 described these and other changes as attacks on the social honour of the Goyigama.

It is not surprising that the first article in the mandate-ola of investigators Fretz and Samlant responding to the petitions was a promise the Company would not ask uncommon or not required work anymore. This happened ‘without distinction of person or caste’, the petitioners complained. Sluijsken, in the second mandate-ola, subsequently decided that ‘henceforth no people will be forced to any services that opposed their descent or caste’.²³⁶ Throughout his mandate-ola Sluijsken referred several times to this article, for instance when naindes complained about carrying the palanquin. This village naindes ‘from good descent’ requested to be only asked for the Company services they were obliged to while receiving their accodomodessans. Sluijsken promised that they would only have to do Company village services and other work according to custom and descent.²³⁷ The naindes of the Four Baygams were earlier ordered to do uncommon services ‘to their great regret’. They had to carry palanquins and pingos. (Figure 8) Their compulsory work contained already of sowing Company fields, construction of dams and elephant stables, and mending rest houses. So, they wished to be released from tasks against custom.²³⁸

The muhandiram of the silversmiths let himself be carried around in palanquins and had people holding a parasol for him. He even did this before the eyes of ‘decent Goyigama’. The petitioners requested a prohibition. Petitioners from the Goyigama caste

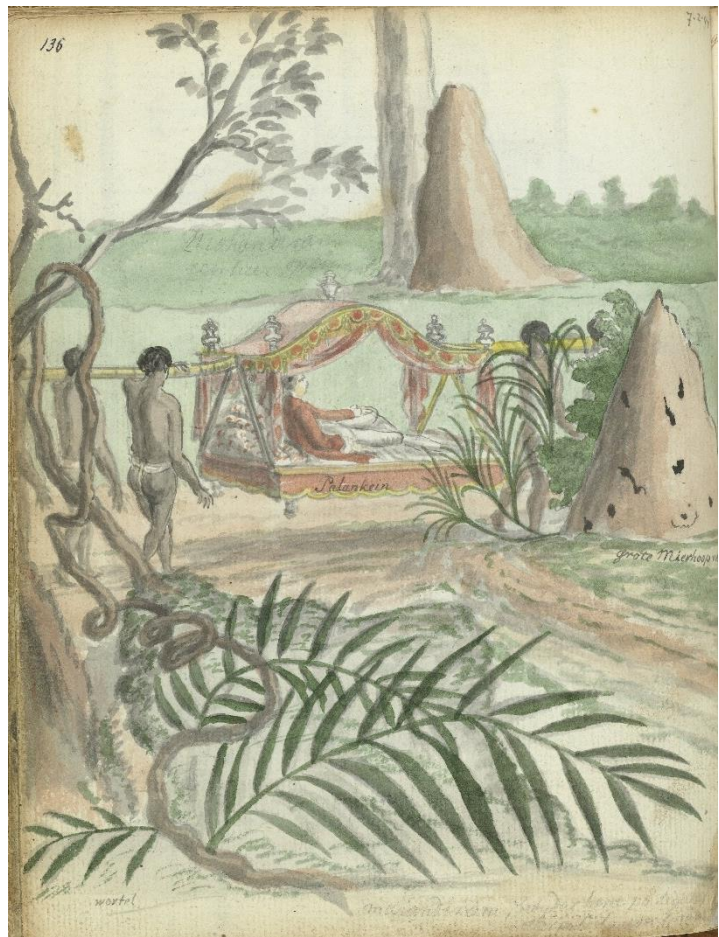


Figure 8: Jan Brandes, Palanquin. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. NG-1985-7-2-94.

²³⁵ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 194–95, 218.

²³⁶ SLNA, 1/2908, 28 May 1790, Proceedings of the meetings of the commissioners Fretz and Samlant, f. 15-16, SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluijsken, f. 33, article 4.

²³⁷ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 59, article 51, NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §11.

²³⁸ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 11.

sketch a situation in which the colonial officials and their local counterparts appointed people based on what was beneficial to the VOC, instead of basing this on people's descent. The petitioners saw the appointment of 'disgraceful people' as an embarrassment for people of good descent.²³⁹ Some petition writers noted that their headmen even appointed enslaved overseers and kangans above them in Company work. These overseers disregarded them and flogged them on their backs. The petitioners wished to be served by people from the minor castes. Sluijsken promised them in the second mandate-ola that they would be respected and treated with kindness. Above all, he promised that enslaved people would never be chosen again before freeborn persons for these kinds of positions.²⁴⁰ Sluijsken also decreed that no one was allowed to be carried around in palanquins if this was uncommon according to their caste.²⁴¹ Not only the local officials disrespected local customs. The petitions show that the VOC also ordered labourers to peel cinnamon for whom it was unusual labour. Under Van den Graaff the pressure on cinnamon peelers increased. In a petition, the request got transferred if, from that moment on, only the lower castes would be ordered to peel cinnamon instead of people of the Goyigama caste. Mudaliyars from good descent, appuhamu, naindes, 'several other people from good castes', and, as the mudaliyars of the Wellabodapattu wrote in another petition, even village heads had to peel cinnamon.²⁴² So, people from – in their eyes – 'good descent' resisted against doing work of lower castes, like working on cinnamon plantations.

Thus, the worldview the Goyigama caste introduced in the petitions is a hegemonic formation. They presented themselves as part of this caste, together with the rituals and honour that was associated with their descent. The VOC administration broke traditional caste norms but did not hesitate to establish parallel intra-caste hierarchies by appointing minor headmen from lower caste above people from the Goyigama caste. This not only against custom but also humiliating according to the peasant-cultivators. To them, caste hierarchy was important and they understood themselves as part of a caste group in the petitions. This differed from prominent headmen, as they were often not given any caste identity in thombos and their position was already quite stable.²⁴³

Unreasonable punishments, ordered by colonial officials or their local counterparts, affected the honour of the peasants as well. When the labourers refused to do unusual work, they got punished in a way uncommon and below their caste. The punishment was so bad that their backs got torn, they almost died and had to lay on their banana beds and take medicines to be able to work again after months.²⁴⁴ Two dismissed arachchis named Senewante Jasinghe and Abegoenewaade showed the wounds on their backs to investigators Fretz and Samlant. Arachchis should not have been flogged on their bare backs,

²³⁹ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 57, article 42-43.

²⁴⁰ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 57-58, article 45.

²⁴¹ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 57, article 44.

²⁴² NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §12.2, 7-8 June 1790, NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 5, §4, 9 June 1790, petition no. 18, §3.

²⁴³ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 195.

²⁴⁴ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §1.

but should be flogged with their clothes still on, they called out. Van Angelbeek replied that if they had been wearing clothes as arachchis should be clothed, they would not have been punished so severely. Hundreds of people received these unfair and severe punishments, according to the petitioners.²⁴⁵

The punishment of women seems to touch the inhabitants most deeply. Petitioners used the story of the widow of the muhandiram Abesegere to put forward the topic of the disgraceful punishment inflicted on the widow of a man of good birth and rank and her family. Imprisonment and corporal punishment like that was challenging old customs:

The Europeans lords are honouring the female gender and are very willing to forgive their small missteps, but the widow of the muhandiram Abesegere is, because of a small complaint [against her] in the *attapattu mandoe* [the residence of the Secretariat or guards of the dessava] where an assembly is of communal persons who reason disgraceful (...), arrested and imprisoned as well as other women, received corporal punishment, hammered with both legs in the chain and above that many got send many to Badagiriya. [The court was] conscious of causing embarrassment [with this] punishment.²⁴⁶

In a couple of petitions, one finds the earnest plea if women could be cleared from punishments, especially from being put to work, because it was ‘never common that women worked in Ceylon’. Even for minor crimes, they were now sent to Badagiriya while their children stayed at home. Women who fled when they heard their husbands had died in Badagiriya, got arrested and had to work on rice fields in other villages.²⁴⁷

During the uprising and in petition writing women played a minor role. As is written in Chapter Two, a couple of women fled into the forest when they heard that the investigation committee arrived at their village. I could only identify one female petition writer, a mother who asked for an inquiry of the unfair detention of her son who was send to Badagiriya and had to do convict labour in the *kaditoek* residence.²⁴⁸ In one petition a complaint about a woman occurs. The wife of the muhandiram of the Kandabodapattu was accused by the inhabitants of the Four Baygams for taking more adukku and pehindoes than was requested.²⁴⁹ Rupesinghe notes about women in Sri Lanka that the majority of the litigants and witnesses who appeared in the Galle Landraad were men. Still, women were significant participants in the Galle Landraad. In more than fifty percent of Rupesinghe’s sample cases, women came in connection with court cases as litigants or witnesses.²⁵⁰ The set of petitions this thesis is based on should not be seen as representative for the participation of women in public life and in the Dutch

²⁴⁵ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §1.

²⁴⁶ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §2.

²⁴⁷ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 34, article 2. NA (NL), HR 595, 7-8 June 1790, petition no. 5, §19, SLNA, 1/2912, 9 June 1790, petition no. 18.

²⁴⁸ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 33.

²⁴⁹ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 11, §3.

²⁵⁰ Seneviratne-Rupesinghe, ‘Negotiating Custom, Colonial Lawmaking in the Galle Landraad’, 82–84.

judicial system. In the historiography of Sri Lanka, women are usually seen as disassociated from positions of political power or waging war, they participated in agricultural work.²⁵¹ If mainly men assembled themselves, wrote and handover petitions at Hakmana or in another place the investigators visited them, it makes sense that male protesters petitioned against the wrongs done to them and their family. For example, the naindes who worked in Matara fort for the *mokkedon* complained about the *mokkedon*, because he ordered their women to breastfeed his baby without any payment.²⁵² Petitioners wrote that since *dessava van Angelbeek* started his government all the inhabitants, ‘big and small, men and women’, suffered from many punishments, pain, sorrows, disadvantages and injustices.²⁵³ The disrespectful treatment of women is one of the notable complaints of the peasant-cultivators.

4.3 *Exploitation, corruption and taxation*

One of the many disturbances of the peasants’ lives was the decree from the *dessava* to sow paddy-fields on specific times. Crops withered as suddenly the month of sowing did not coincide with the rain season(s), the fields got too much or too little water. Subsequently, the peasants had problems with paying back the rice they borrowed and they experienced all kinds of misery. There was not enough food for their cows and they had no time to work on their *chenas* and deliver food for travelling officials.²⁵⁴ Another disturbance was the sudden cut of soursop trees for the Company.²⁵⁵ The soursop trees were sources of *jak-fruit*, a substitute for rice as a staple food.²⁵⁶ It is often mentioned that headmen ordered to cut down these trees for making wooden planks for boats and other vessels out of it.²⁵⁷

The newly established cinnamon plantations (Figure 9) did not only disturb the customary caste-based occupations, but it also touched the peasants’ cattle and their fields. The petitioners wrote that buffalos and cows played an important role in cultivating their lands and for transporting their goods as salt, cotton, and grain. However, the overseers of the new cinnamon plantations did not provide proper fences. This made that the buffaloes and cows could walk into the plantations. The overseers killed or captured the animals, sold or neglected to feed them if the owners did not pay money to get them back. ‘In this way, many inhabitants lost many irretrievable animals.’²⁵⁸ What is more, two years before April 1790, when the *dessava* of Matara decided to clear land for the realization of cinnamon, areca nut, coffee,

²⁵¹ Seneviratne-Rupesinghe, 85.

²⁵² NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, 29, §1.

²⁵³ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 3. See Appendix II for the complete petition.

²⁵⁴ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 35-36, article 3.

²⁵⁵ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 18, §7-8.

²⁵⁶ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 70.

²⁵⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §7, NA (NL), HR 595, 7-8 June 1790, petition no. 5, §15.

²⁵⁸ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §6, ‘diergelijke wijze hebben de ingezeeten onnoemelijke veel beesten moeten verliesen’. Eventually, the VOC officials decided that the plantations needed to be surrounded by both fences and channels and that the owners had to put wood around the necks of the buffalos and cows so they were not able to peak through the fences. SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 39, article 6.

sandalwood, and pepper plantations, many fruitful trees were cut down. Also, the gardens and fields of some peasants got besieged by the plantations. Only the owners who bribed the baddecorn could keep their lands. The peasants who worked on the plantations got paid, as was the custom, *maintementos* for their work, but the planting was in vain. In this way, the Company lost payment made in the form of money or provisions to the performers of *rajakariya*. Besides this, the owners of the gardens and fields lost their farming fields.²⁵⁹

Other projects of the VOC, like the restoration and installation of dams, water reservoirs, and flood controls also influenced the lives of the peasants. A river bifurcation from the Morrua corle to the Katuwana river stirred up the Giruwayapattu as the new drainage flowed over. Young paddy was washed away by the flooding and after a second flooding, the peasant-cultivators lost the remnants of the harvest. The Company, however, did not erase the debt of the seeds, after this great loss. Subsequently, the peasants had to lease out their lands and goods to pay back their debts.²⁶⁰ These stories coincide with the stance of Alicia Schrikker on the causes of the uprising. Schrikker articulates this by writing that ‘in Matara, the native labourers rebelled against the continuous call for labour. In general, the increased exploitation seems to have weighed heavily on the backs of the peasants.’²⁶¹



Figure 9: Jan Brandes, Cinnamon Gardens, Maradana. Private collection.

²⁵⁹ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 2.

²⁶⁰ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 49, article 19, NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 2, §2.

²⁶¹ Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815*, 92.

Almost all petitions with more than one complaint share the component of a request or abolishment of taxes. For example, the ‘heavy’ bazaar lease or the ‘extraordinary body-tax’²⁶² Gardens were taxed with one-half or one-third of the produce and paddy-fields with one-half or one-tenth. The Company measured the paddy-lands according to the sowing capacity. For the gardens, the coconut, jak, and areca nut trees were counted.²⁶³ The petitions expose a couple of abuses in this regard. Currently, the dessor asked taxes on chenas, while, according to the inhabitants of the Matara dessor, this was not the case before, ‘as the cutting and sowing of the chenas was a very difficult job.’²⁶⁴ In a couple of gardens, the jak trees disappeared, but the owners still had to pay taxes. They asked for a new thombo compilation by representatives of the Company.²⁶⁵

What is more, local chiefs were competing for the produce of the peasants and misused their position when collecting taxes. A muhandiram forced the mayorals of the Four Baygams to use their own sowing seeds on his bad fields and when the time of harvest came, thereupon he installed two lascorins to make sure that half of the harvest was taken from the mayorals without even paying back the sowing seeds the mayorals invested.²⁶⁶ The mudaliyar of the Morrua corle added a weight when he was weighting the cardamon which resulted in higher taxes. Some inhabitants of the Morrua even had to sell their cattle and farming fields and were totally devastated. Moreover, the pressure to produce oil also enhanced. If the inhabitants of the Morrua corle did not reach the goal they would be arrested and punished.²⁶⁷ And for instance, the mayorals and inhabitants of Horagoda, Naepe,²⁶⁸ and Elgiriya complained about their vidane. He did not live in their villages and insisted that, when he visited, a house was made ready for him, as well as foods and drinks. Once in a while the inhabitants had to send him a woman. The vidane also asked more services of them, than was usual.²⁶⁹

4.4 *The labour of Porowäkaraya*

Woodcutters who worked in Matara carpenter's yard complained about their kangan Kamene Jajesegere. He appointed overseers who were from minor caste than the woodcutters who were from the Goyigama caste. Their petition started with ‘that no ethnic group is placed above the Goyigama.’²⁷⁰ People from lower caste groups should be submissive to the Goyigama, but now smiths, with whom people from

²⁶² SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 58-59, article 49-50.

²⁶³ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 110.

²⁶⁴ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §19, ‘Wijl het kappen en bezaijen der chennassen een zeer moeilijke arbeid is.’

²⁶⁵ NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §12.1.

²⁶⁶ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 11, §9.

²⁶⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 9.

²⁶⁸ I have not been able to find the current-day name or location of Naepe. Naepe must have been close to Horagoda and Elgiriya, about 15 kilometres inland from Mirissa.

²⁶⁹ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 11, §1.

²⁷⁰ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 8, ‘Er word anders geen geslagt boven de wellales gesteld, [terwijl alle de anderen elk in zijn soort de wellales onderdanig zijn.]’

lower castes than the Goyigama did not even want to eat together with were appointed as overseers, the petitioners wrote.²⁷¹ Woodcutters, also known as Porowākara, do not occur often in the historiography of Sri Lanka, but they might be depicted by Jan Brandes on Figure 10. Bryce Finley Ryan touches upon their existence in his influential *Caste in Modern Ceylon: The Sinhalese System in Transition*. The ancient service with which Porowākara were associated is woodcutting, especially for the Kandyan king's elephants' stables.²⁷² Generally, they have been considered a distinct caste of lower status than any claimant to the Goyigama rank, states Ryan. Porowākara sometimes identified themselves as part of the Goyigama, yet there is no unambiguous ascription of these people.²⁷³ Contemporary authors, like governors, wrote briefly about Porowākara. The VOC officials described them as 'emergency workers', as they only performed services for the ruler on extraordinary occasions. According to Governor Joan Gideon Loten, they transported timber and assist at elephant hunts, cut wood for the gun powder mill, and supply the Company with wood for different objects. Moreover, they supplied herbs to the Company's apothecaries.²⁷⁴ Governor Julius Valentijn Stein van Gollennesse assigned Goyigama caste to the Porowākara in his memoir.²⁷⁵ However, Governor Loten firmly wrote that Porowākara were not at all part of the Goyigama.²⁷⁶ In the petition by the woodcutters, they identified themselves as part of the Goyigama caste and wished to be treated according to their social honour.²⁷⁷

Nirmal Dewasiri provides us with the social division of labour in the Colombo dessavony in 1743. Of the more than forty occupations, Porowākara are by far the biggest service performers. 33,5% of the 927 people are identified as Porowākara. Persons who did nainde service were the second biggest group, with 9,4%.²⁷⁸ Following the petitions, the labourers ordered to go to Badagiriya were mainly emergency workers. The collective inhabitants of Midigama belonging to the *heerlijkheid* of Weligama gave insight into the common work Porowākara did 'since the moment this land was ruled by the European lords.'²⁷⁹ It contained building and cleaning rest houses and warehouses as well as supplying cloth for decoration and wood for the limekiln. These Emergency workers dug canals and

²⁷¹ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 28.

²⁷² Bryce Finley Ryan, *Caste in Modern Ceylon: The Sinhalese System in Transition* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 101.

²⁷³ Ryan, 101.

²⁷⁴ Joan Gideon Loten, 'Memoir of Joan Gideon Loten Governor of Ceylon Delivered to His Successor Jan Schreuder on February 28, 1757', trans. E. Reimers, Digitized objects University Library Utrecht Special Collections, 1935, 28, <http://objects.library.uu.nl/reader/index.php?obj=1874-366706&lan=en#page//47/49/51/4749514500877114514398179110447830172.jpg>.

²⁷⁵ Julius Stein van Gollennesse, *Memoir of Julius Stein van Gollennesse, Governor of Ceylon, 1743–1751*, trans. and introd. S. Arasaratnam (Colombo: Department of National Archives, 1974), via: Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 278–79.

²⁷⁶ Loten, 'Memoir of Joan Gideon Loten', 29.

²⁷⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 28.

²⁷⁸ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 98. (SLNA/1/2819)

²⁷⁹ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 33, article 1, NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 16, 'Zedert den tijd dat dit land van de heeren Europeanen is overgegaan worden door de noodhulpers van majoraels de volgende dienste verricht.'

made fences around four Company's gardens, cultivated and guard those, gathered coconuts and made oil. They also cultivated areca nut gardens and did Company work in the cinnamon plantations. Above all, their names were written down to go to Badagiriya.²⁸⁰

Porowäkaraya complained that currently not one but all men from a family were ordered to go to Badagiriya while bringing goods for their own maintenance. In the first mandate-ola Fetz and Samlant wrote that it was custom that Company imposed this amount of work on Porowäkaraya, even from one family. But the people responded with the notion that before they paid no taxes on their gardens and sowing fields, as their compulsory work was part of their service for the sovereign. However, currently, they had to pay both taxes and do compulsory labour. Now Porowäkaraya had no time to work on their fields and gardens, pay taxes *and* supply for their own maintenance. They asked Commander Sluijsken for *maintementos*, payment made in the form of money or provisions to the performers of rajakariya, as was customary, so they could sustain themselves and their families.²⁸¹

Pim de Zwart ascribes the woodcutters as one of the agricultural workers, who were less dependent on agriculture and were drawn into wage-labour in the market-oriented plantation agriculture in the eighteenth century. The woodcutters are in the same category as naindes, Salagama and Durava.²⁸² The last two coped more readily to the demands of the colonial intervention, Dewasiri states in *The Adaptable Peasant*. In the Dutch colonial period, caste-based occupations in the expanding urban areas tended to transform into the exclusive sources of livelihood. This was generally speaking the case for the Salagama, Karava, and Durava, as the Company took them away from the traditional peasant agriculture. The work of the woodcutters, living in the interior, once occasionally as part of their labour for the lord of the land, also changed with the continuing request for their work by the Company.²⁸³

It seems harder for Porowäkaraya to adjust to the new situation Dutch colonialism brought them in. While for Salagama, Karava and Durava caste groups colonialism gave way for social and economic mobility, the petitions sketch colonial extension and intervention in the interior as affecting and effecting the peasants' lives in a negative way. The VOC and the headmen put a lot of pressure on these emergency helpers because they wished to enlarge plantations and plantation revenue, especially in the second half of the eighteenth century. The traditional rajakariya system proved to be insufficient, so the VOC and its local agents turned to Porowäkaraya for clearing lands to convert it into plantations, and maintaining the cinnamon plantations, forts, and waterworks.²⁸⁴ Dewasiri notes that 'if in the pre-

²⁸⁰ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 33, article 1, NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 16.

²⁸¹ SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluysken, f. 33, article 1. NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, petition no. 1, §1.

²⁸² Pim de Zwart, 'Population, Labour and Living Standards in Early Modern Ceylon: An Empirical Contribution to the Divergence Debate', *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 49, no. 3 (1 September 2012): 239.

²⁸³ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 214.

²⁸⁴ Loten, 'Memoir of Joan Gideon Loten', 28; Belt, 'Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794', 75-77.

colonial period the demand for rajakariya labour was high enough to disturb the balance between peasant production and the rajakariya system only in emergency situations, it was a permanent feature in the colonial situation.²⁸⁵ In the petitions, but also by means of protest, the consequences of this disruption become clear.



Figure 10: Cut-out of: Jan Brandes, Rural scene with ox-cart near Colombo. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. NG-1985-7-2-50. A Ceylonese scene with an ox-cart, a seated ordinary Sinhalese man, and a black judicial officer, a small lake and coconut or 'klapper' palms on the other side. Oct. 1785. Sinhalese ox-cart with firewood cost 30 stuivers per load. Oct. 1785. (Translation: De Bruijn and Raben, *The World of Jan Brandes*, 244)

4.5 Religious worlds and family life

The world of the peasants was – if they were free from rajakariya service – their small settlements, from which they worked on their fields and gardens. The daily routine of cultivation was broken by special festivities, religious ceremonies, pilgrimages, visits to and from relatives from other settlements. The most important festival was, according to Dewasiri, the Sinhalese New Year. People travelled often to celebrate this season with their family members and faced the dangers of the jungle. The pathways and ambalam guided the travellers on their way.²⁸⁶ Naranderije, arachchi from the Hakuru, was one of the people travelling back to his family for the Sinhalese New Year. He was ordered in the year 1789, just before the festival, to depart for Godagama, to work at an elephants' compound. Although Naranderije got no leave to celebrate Sinhalese New Year's in his village, he still took two days off and left. The

²⁸⁵ Dewasiri, *Adaptable Peasant*, 95.

²⁸⁶ Dewasiri, 27.

dessava, presumably as punishment, detached him to cultivate Company fields and later sent him to Badagiriya.²⁸⁷ Naranderije was not the only one who was ordered to work during this festival. The mayorals of the Wellabodapattu wrote that even though the ‘white people’ celebrated their New Year every twelfth month, the ‘black inhabitants’ cannot celebrate their own New Year for three years onwards.²⁸⁸ Inhabitants belonging to the rest houses of the Giruwayapattu also noted that ‘since the lords got possession of these lands we got a day off Company work for the Sinhalese New Year, but the current lord dessava does not permit us freedom, but, on the contrary, lets [us] work.’²⁸⁹ The last straw before people started to protest seems to be the decree to send every suitable man to Badagiriya exactly in the week of the Sinhalese New Year.

Besides complaints about the Sinhalese New Year and the offering of foods to church ministers, the petitions do not contain complaints about the interference of the VOC in the spiritual lives of petitioners. This might imply that involvement did not go as far that the peasants wished to protest against it. Most of the Sinhalese-speakers were attached to Buddhism, with the Kandyan king as protector of their faith.²⁹⁰ The mid-eighteenth-century revival of Buddhism evoked in the maritime provinces around the town of Matara. After the Kandyan-Dutch war of 1762-1766, during which Dutch colonial power was severely threatened, the Dutch showed friendly gestures towards Buddhist monks. Before the war monasteries had spread especially in the south of the island. Monasteries were connected with temples in the Kandyan kingdom. One of these monasteries was the Mulkirigala Raja Maha Vihara, close to Hakmana and Dikwella, centrally located in the Matara district.²⁹¹ (Figure 11) Many Dutch governors had voiced that the people of the maritime regions tended to see the King of Kandy as their sovereign.²⁹² Buddhist monks returned back to the low country after having had their monastic training in Kandy.²⁹³ In my range of petitions, the king of Kandy is not explicitly described as ‘our king’, but the inhabitants of the Magampattu write that some of them chose to flee to the King’s country after they got the call to go to Badagiriya.²⁹⁴

Although Buddhism was visibly present in the Matara district, inhabitants of the district also turned to Christianity. Significant numbers – mainly headmen – adopted Catholicism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and turned to Protestantism in the Dutch period. It is outside the range of this thesis to pay attention to the significance of the (protestant) Christian faith in the south of

²⁸⁷ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 32.

²⁸⁸ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 18, §9.

²⁸⁹ NA (NL), HR 595, 7-8 June 1790, petition no. 5, §14, ‘zeedert dat de heeren deese landen in bezit gekreegen hebben zij wij op onze singaleese nieuwe jaar dag vrij van s comp diensten geweest dog de presente heer dessave heeft ons geen vrijheijd vergund maar in teegendeel laten werken.’

²⁹⁰ Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period*, 29.

²⁹¹ Kitsiri Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900: A Study of Religious Revival and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 82–83, 186; Wagenaar, *Galle, VOC-Vestiging in Ceylon.*, 22.

²⁹² Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness in the Kandyan Period*, 83.

²⁹³ Malalgoda, *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society, 1750-1900*, 186.

²⁹⁴ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 8, §1.

Sri Lanka.²⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the petitions do provide glimpses of the presence of Christianity in people's daily lives. The brother of Diedenipatte Rajepasse Simon, Diengiamie, married a Christian woman, but 'in a Sinhalese way'. After the death of Diengiamie, his father-in-law confiscated all the goods and houses of the family of Dienenipatte.²⁹⁶ Only under Dutch-Roman law husband and wife pooled their resources in a community of property, but this was not a feature of local norms.²⁹⁷ Diedenipatte invoked the Roman-Dutch law, as the marriage was not registered as a Christian marriage and hoped that the institutions decided in his family's advantage. The case of Diedenipatte shows that the Dutch imposition of the requirement for registering marriages on the residents was not always successful.

What is more, his petition gives insight into how Diedenipatte Rajepasse Simon – his name reveals conversion to Christianity – negotiated colonial law-making for an inheritance dispute. However, Van Angelbeek responded on his petition that Diedenipatte already handed in a request on this case, two years ago in Deiyandara. But the prosecutor never reported at the porta or Landraad, although the dessava suggested him to do so. Van Angelbeek defended himself for neglecting the case before Fretz and Samlant by saying that if Diedenipatte only had applied at the Landraad, everything would have been solved already.²⁹⁸ Diedenipatte might have considered his odds small to win the case. Lack of money for payment at the Landraad could as well be the reason for this situation, especially because all Diedenipatte's family's goods and lands were confiscated. His neglect of the trip might be an illustration of the distance that obstructed peasants to go to Matara to present a request to the dessava. As, during the uprising of 1790, the investigators travelled land inwards, litigation became easily accessible again. Diedenipatte lived in the Kandaboddapattu, presumably somewhere between Hakmana and Deiyandrara. These places are between 20-25 kilometres away from Matara, so Diedenipatte would have travelled at least one day through the thick jungle to reach the Landraad in Matara. His petition was translated on 4 May 1790, so he must have written it within the first month of the uprising. I presume that he joined the uprising hoping that he would receive justice. Again, these petitions illustrate how peasant protest was not necessarily a struggle against the state, but a wish for intervention.

We might not have known about the story of Diedenipatte, his brother Diengiamie and their mother, without the submission of Diedenipatte's petition. Diedenipatte starts his letter with the notion that his family took them under their wing when Diedenipatte's father, who was the vidane of Walakanda, died when he and his brother were still children. They lived on a small budget of what the widowed mother earned. Fortunately, the uncle from his mother's side and his cousin from his father's side supplied the family with resources and money. His mother's brother even paid four hundred rixdollars so Diengiamie became vidane arachchi of Walakanda and could marry the daughter of the

²⁹⁵ Rupesinghe already unveils a tip of iceberg concerning references to Christianity in Landraad sources. Ongoing research at Leiden University, with the project *Colonialism Inside Out: Everyday Experience and Plural Practice in Dutch Institutions in Sri Lanka (c. 1700-1800)*, will reveal even more.

²⁹⁶ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 38.

²⁹⁷ Seneviratne-Rupesinghe, 'Negotiating Custom, Colonial Lawmaking in the Galle Landraad', 169.

²⁹⁸ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 38.

arachchi of the attepatu in Matara. An engagement with devastating consequences for the family. Consequently, the petition gives insight into the lives of Diedenipatte's family before their lives were disrupted by Diengihamie's father-in-law.



Figure 11: Jan Brandes, Buddhist cave shrines at Mulkirigala (?). Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. NG-365. Despite the caption telling us the drawing represents a temple and cistern close to Colombo, Nadana Chutiwongs suggests that the temple is quite possible the Mulkirigala Raja Maha Vihara. (De Bruijn and Raben, *The World of Jan Brandes*, 337)

4.6 Conclusion

It seems that the peasants were family and hamlet-focused, especially around the Sinhalese New Year. A festival of celebrating the end of the harvest period, being together with the family in the village, and apparently very important as Company work – and the eventual punishment - got sacrificed for it. Nonetheless, information about religious worlds, family life, eating habits is often missing in the petitions. Presumably, in this respect, colonial officials and their policy did not intervene severely in these parts of their lives. Still the story of Diedenipatte shows for instance that petitions also have the potential to provides glimpses into family life. Peasants had to consider if travelling more than a day to the Landraad in Matara to complain, was worth the expenses and time. Diedenipatte waited until the arrival of Landraad members into the countryside to engage with the VOC judiciary. To villagers, the arrival of the VOC officials in the hinterland also meant that, besides encountering the policymakers,

the executors of this policy and the policy itself, a prompt extraction of taxes occurred. Uncommon taxes, unexpected calls on workers, higher penalties, expensive visits from officials to the inland and rest houses and disrespect of local customs did actually interrupt the predictable rural farm life.

Many petitioners presented the Sinhalese society as a layered society where caste and the accompanying privileges played an important role. Often petitioners only identified themselves with their caste group or position in specific cases about duties that were asked from them or punishment that was given, conflicting with their place in the (imagined) hegemonic formation. The petitions give insight into the lives of Porowākaraya. Relying on Dewasiri's case study of villages in the dessavony of Colombo, the group of Porowākaraya compiled one-third of the village population. They must have been the main group the VOC called upon to work at Badagiriya. While for Salagama, Karava and Durava castes, colonialism gave way for social and economic mobility, the petitions sketch colonial extension and intervention in the interior as affecting and effecting the labourers' lives. It was hard for them to adjust to the new situation, also because they had barely time to work in their own fields and sustain for their families.²⁹⁹ Thus, the aspects of the lives of the inland population that reach us through petitions are mainly disturbances by the European VOC officials and their local intermediaries.

²⁹⁹ This might explain the complaint Schrikker wrote down, the people “would not even have time to enjoy in peace the blessings that had overcome them by the flourishing of their fields”: ANRI, HR 3852, 19 April 1790, resolution in the council of Galle. Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815*, 70.

Concluding observations

It was around the Sinhalese New Year in 1790 that inhabitants of the Matara dessavony protested against Company work and mistreatment, instead of paying the annual obeisance to their landlords in this period. Described until now as a revolt against the VOC government and a clash of mentality between the VOC and the native population, the uprising of 1790 and the switch to petitioning should be seen as a defence mechanism of the inland population.³⁰⁰ Only some powerful individuals might have had a political agenda and might have initiated the uprising. While reading the petitions, the majority of the protesters seems to have assembled to receive attention from the Dutch East India Company for their woeful situation. The trip to Badagiriya was life-threatening, moreover, petitioners wrote that they could not live anymore with the disrespectful treatment of both colonial officials and their local counterparts. In the study, I transmitted an alternative narrative, by turning history upside down and foregrounding the voices and experiences of colonised people. An alternative history constructed on the basis of petitions written by subaltern peoples, often silenced in archives and historiography.

Throughout this thesis, I examined how the inhabitants of the Matara dessavony resisted, negotiated and experienced colonialism around the year 1790. Chapter One shows that collecting petitions was a mechanism the colonial state launched. This practice was appropriated by the inhabitants of the Matara district. Looking beyond the colonial mindset and the purpose for which documents were archived, the testimonies and petitions transfer perspectives on the resistance that were radically different from those of Company officials. These documents reveal the transformative agency of the collective resistance against constant exploitation and the trip to Badagiriya, as described in Chapter Two. Chapter Three outlines the ways in which the petitioners negotiated with the VOC to bring back an ideal past. Their rhetoric contained historical rights and customs, equity and legitimacy of the Company on the island. The forty-four petitions I look at, convey mainly moments of disruption by the colonial state and its representatives in the slow rhythm of the peasants' lives, shows Chapter Four. Traces from the inland population of the Matara dessavony in the archive reveal *contrasts* in the resistance, petitions and society, *culture* and negotiation in the petitions, and *mobility* of colonised people, but also mobility of ideas, caste and status, and in history.

Contrasts

In the year 1790, inhabitants of the Matara dessavony searched confrontation with European officials and local intermediaries. This was a very conscious choice as they would not have taken the risk of dismissing the approved village defence mechanisms and safer avoidance protests, like migrating. The repeating decree to depart for Badagiriya might be the immediate motivation, but also the appropriated

³⁰⁰ Among others in: Belt, 'Introductie Memorie van Overgave Willem Jacob van de Graaff, 1794', 55; Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815*, 80.

pretext for confronting VOC representatives with their grievances. Regardless, the testimonies reveal that the protesters wished to live undisturbed by the colonial state. They preferred living according to custom, traditional rights and morals. However, in 1790, they actually appealed for the judiciary of the Company to resolve local disputes. Petitioners also asked their addressees in Galle and Colombo to make sure that the exploitation became softened. Dissident peasant-cultivators made eagerly use of the call of the investigating committees to switch to petitioning. The petitions convey apparent contradictions. To get their wishes fulfilled, the writers internalized a form of inferiority as they framed their arguments in order to flatter the VOC official. However, without thinking themselves inferior, as they made use of their collectivity and even threatened with withdrawal of their consent. Yet another contrast during the resistance was the unity countered with internal division. Eventually, the sophisticated engagement of the peasant-cultivators resulted in the desired changes. Besides that, while some protesters adopted a rebellious attitude, others declared their loyalty to the VOC. As people with different occupations, positions and residences joined the uprising, the complaints, and the self-understanding were diverse. It displays that 'the colonised' does not exist.

Massive changes in the present disturbed the slow rhythm of the peasants' lives. For instance, projects initiated by Governor Van de Graaff and dessorava Van Angelbeek, like cinnamon plantations, and drainage and irrigation projects. The climate often worked against the peasants, their crop withered or was washed away by floods. Moreover, the prominent headmen inflicted more hardship as they made the peasants pay too much taxes and work in private gardens and plantations for too little funding. Reading the petitions shows that especially the emergency workers had a hard time living with the increasing demand for their labour and the unceasing taxation of their harvest by the Company. These labourers are an under-exposed group of people in historiography, also known as Porowäkaraya. Their situation is the opposite of what is claimed of Salagama, Karava, and Durava for whom colonialism transformed their caste-based occupations into their exclusive sources of livelihood. They adapted easier to the colonial extension and intervention in their lives. This thesis is an encouragement to look into testimonies of people from these caste groups, to see if alternative sources might call the abovementioned statement into question, as not only Porowäkaraya rose up in the centuries of Sri Lanka's colonial occupation.

Culture

Petitions written during the 1790 uprising provide glimpses into the family life, religious worlds and morals of the peasants in the deep south of Sri Lanka. The Sinhalese New Year was an important festival, a time to spend with family. A couple of petitioners endorsed this, as they urged the Company for days off work during this period. Religion is hardly addressed in the petitions, even though the VOC infiltrated in the inland, peasants still lived in their isolated worlds. They only left these worlds when they had to carry out rajakariya or protection from the VOC or the Kandyan king. One of their common

morals was respect for women and the wish to relieve them from Company work. Especially people from the Goyigama castes presented the society as a hegemonic formation. They wished that the rituals and honour associated with their descent would return. At the moment of petition writing, working on cinnamon plantations and newly appointed supervisors down on the social ladder tarnished the social honour of the Goyigama. A self-understanding as part of a caste group might be part of the petitioners' rhetoric, as well as a presentation of the world they imagined or wished to live in.

The petitions investigated in this thesis emphasised locality, the Self, the Other, and the past. Colonialism had an adverse effect on traditional agriculture, preservation of the own culture, power relations on local and national levels, and ways of earning a living in the countryside. Thus, petition writers were aware of their own past and how it was interwoven with the history of the VOC in Sri Lanka. Consequently, petitioners grounded their requests on historical customs and rights. However, they presented the VOC, not as the Other, but rather the exploiting European colonial officials and their local counterparts. The Company actually had to protect petitioners against this Other was their rhetoric. Petitioners appealed to ideas of equity and the legitimacy of the VOC on the island. Thus, among the petitioners, there was a certain kind of confidence in the VOC jurisdiction and the expectation of a settlement of local disputes to their advantage. A novelty in research on colonial petitions is that in the forty-four petitions of this study, the writers suggest a common vision and shared interest between themselves and the VOC. They mimicked the colonial policy in their own advantage. Hence, the petitions convey a self-consciousness of the writers of their rights, their history, and their collective agency.

Mobility

Petitioners protested against the many changes that colonialism, colonial officials and their local counterparts brought upon them. They wished the situation to be as it was in the (ideal) past. One of the features of this past was the possibility to receive justice. At the moment, the current *dessava* and his unfaithful servants made fair jurisdiction unlikely. As appealing to the *dessava*, the *Landraad* or the Governor was also a long, expensive and, for some impossible, journey, the inhabitants of the *Matara* *dessavony* attracted colonial officials land inwards. Colonial officials were more mobile, as they had access to several ways of transportation. In the inland, the inhabitants encountered these officials during their inspection and leisure travels, or at the elephants' enclosure. VOC officials stayed overnight at rest houses, visual reminders colonial domination in the countryside. In historiography, the rest houses – *ambalam* in Sinhalese – are described in different contexts. This thesis brings these contexts for the first time altogether! Rest houses, located by the road were built for the convenience of long-distance travellers, like people who had to carry out *rajakariya* or visited shrines or family. On these trips, travellers shared ideas, stories, and messages. Via the *ambalama* information about the place *Badagirya*, previous rights and customs, and the uprising might have spread through the countryside, thus it ensured

the mobility of ideas. During the protest of 1790, the rest house of Hakmana transformed into a place of assembly. Here, protesters transmitted complaints, requests, and petitions to the visiting investigators. Moving to rest houses, instead of for example to the Kandyan king or another patron, shows once again that the protesters searched for more state intervention or expected that the VOC would act in the advantage of the peasants.

Social mobility is another feature the petitions transfer. Petitioners, mainly Porowākara and Goyigama, complained about the social mobility of people with traditionally lower positions in society. These runners-ups appropriated the status symbols of the people they surpassed, like being carried around in a palanquin. Thus, they rebelled against customs and the hegemonic formation the agricultural caste tried to hold on tightly. Also, prominent headmen seemed to become more influential, but this went together with corruption and exploitation. Further research can look into the position of these intermediaries and their social mobility. Besides this, inhabitants of the Matara dessavony moved from being silenced people towards fully historical actors. While striking and writing petitions, they invaded into the hypothetical moments and mechanisms of fact creation and fact assembly, although they have for long been silenced in the making of narratives and history. Still, Spivak's question 'Can the subaltern speak?' should not be neglected. On the one hand, not everyone is represented in the petitions and a certain format had to be followed for writing the petitions. On the other hand, the silence of those considered to be at the lowest levels of the social hierarchy is significant. They might consciously remain silent and protested in the everyday, or might be actively suppressed by the colonial authorities. Accordingly, the 1790 petitions provide new knowledge on the lives of the colonised people, in particular, on the ways they engaged with the state, how they moved towards and away from the colonial state. Protesters did not aim to overthrow the Dutch colonial occupation, as later happened in Sri Lanka and other colonies, but voiced their suffering and resistance through approved methods of protest, colonial petitions.

Hence, the petitions analysed in this study takes us into the countryside, away from colonial centres, like Galle and Colombo. The documents contain, as it were, trivial information about the everyday life of peasants. Choosing petitions recorded during a popular protest in the countryside opens a door into the lives of peasant-cultivators. Petitions written during other peasant uprisings in Sri Lanka will provide yet more information about the island.³⁰¹ Also in Galle, and probably many other colonial cities, people handed in petitions. In the Sri Lanka National Archives, a volume with 'Petitions and requests'

³⁰¹ Lodewijk Wagenaar plans to publish in the coming years a volume with petitions written down during the disturbances in Matara around 1757-1758 as part of a *Dutch Sources on South Asia*.

addressed to the Commander of Galle in the period 1763-1783 contains many petitions.³⁰² These documents can – after a first glance – be an addition to what is yet scarcely available on Muslims, women and enslaved in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka. The 1790 petitions already give some insight into the Sinhalese view towards Muslims, for instance, as the petitioners write that the leasing of land by Muslims tarnished their honour.³⁰³ Combining information from petitions and other documents that contain the voices of the colonised, like Landraad cases, or other documents like thombos, will give the possibility to write more life stories of the colonised population.

Concluding, in this thesis I display the richness of colonial petitions to get insight into the condition of colonised humanity. Especially petitions written during an uprising, reveal the lived experience of colonialism as the writers described their current situation as colonised people and pictured their ideal future, still within the constraints of colonialism. Petition writers had no possibility in the past to become historical, due to distance from the places of fact creation and assembly, due to fear, lack of money, or immobility. Precisely because their current state was so miserable, they took the risk of turning their lives upside down, by striking and addressing higher authorities. Forcing the colonial archives might result in finding more petitions in other colonial contexts and places. Decolonisation of the archive continues as long as researchers look for documents, like petitions and other testimonies, from people such as the villagers depicted on Figure 12.



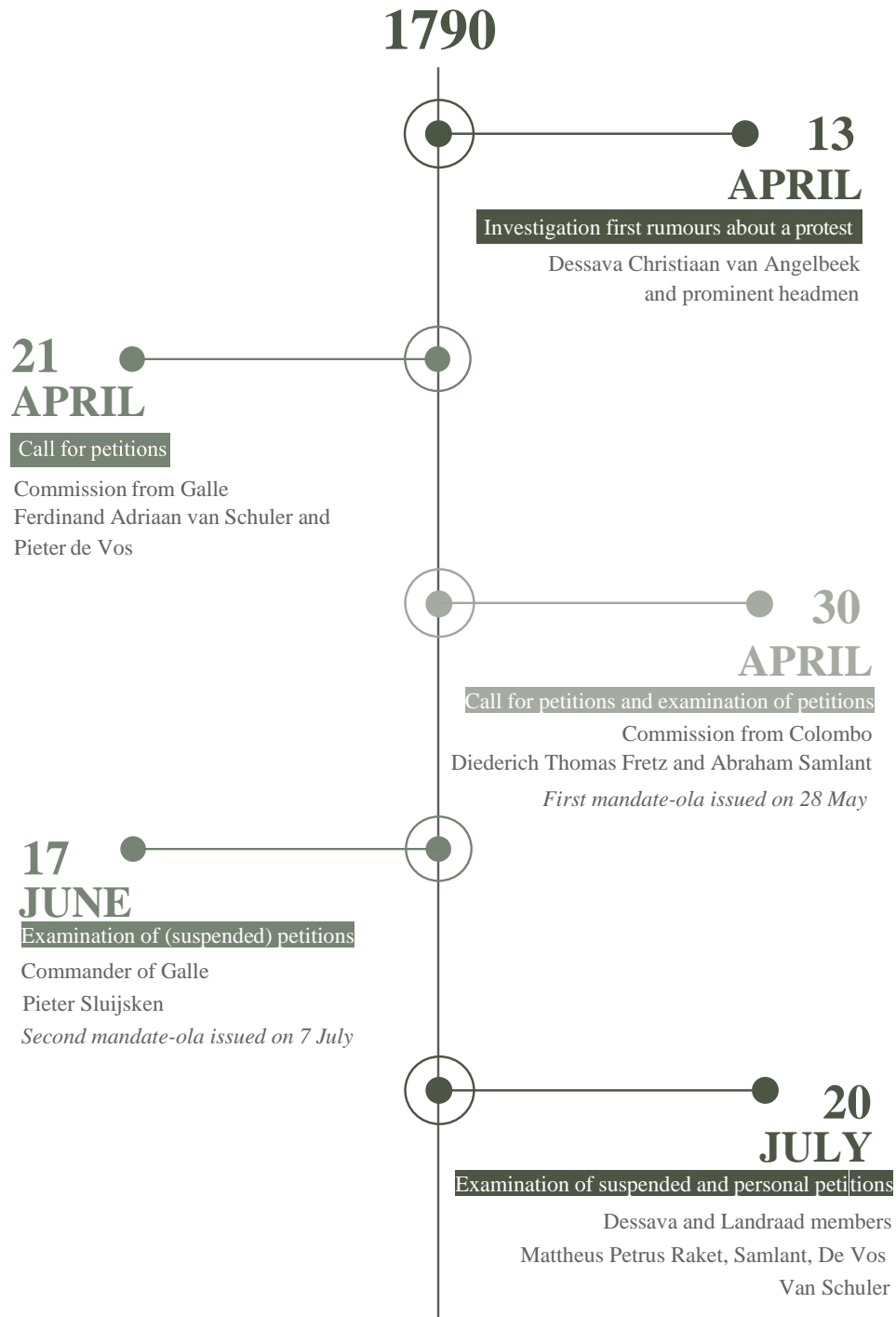
Figure 12: Jan Brandes, Villagers and a hut, 1785-1786.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. NG-1985-7-2-16.

³⁰² SLNA, 1/6020, Miscellaneous requests and petitions addressed to the Commandeur of Galle by individuals; with the Commandeur's orders thereon, 1763 – 1783. Some of these petitions are written in Arabic.

³⁰³ NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 11, §11, NA (NL), HR 595, 9 June 1790, petition no. 34, SLNA, 1/2912, 5 July 1790, Decisions by commander Peter Sluijsken, f. 56-57, article 40-41.

Appendices

I: Timeline: Investigators of the disturbances in the Matara dessavony



II: *Original petition 21 April 1790*

Source: NA (NL), HR 595, 24-27 May 1790, Notes of the meetings of the commissioners from the Ceylonese government D.F. Fretz and A. Samlant with Mr. C. van Angelbeek, head merchant of Galle and dessava of the Matara area about the complaints of the inhabitants of the dessavony on Van Angelbeek, petition no. 3.

Translaat Singelesche brief ola gedateerd 21 april 1790 uit naam en vanweegens verscheide mindere hoofden en Singelesen onderdaenen en inwoonders van de Matureesche dessavonij geschreeven aan den weledele achtb heer kommandeur van Gale en Mature.

Na voorgaende complimenten,

En tijde der Regeering van zijns majesteijd de koning van Kandia Radja Singa, toen het hem behaagd heeft om dit land uit de handen der Portugeeze afteneemen en de heeren Hollanders in dezelve te doen koomen en daer toe zijn majestheids hooge beveelen wierde ontvangen zijn de Portugeezen door hulp van de heeren Hollanders zoo wel als van s konings onderdaenen weggedreeven daerna zijn volgens verdrag alle de regten die den koning bevoorens gehad heeft, zonder eenige veranderingen hem weedere eigen gemaakt en toegekent en de heeren hollanders in bezit van de beneeden landen gesteld hier op zijn veele jaeren vreedig voorbij gegaen door onderhouding en genieting van alle de voorregten die bevorens gewoon geweest waeren, dog het zeedert heben de aende portas van de heeren hollanders in elke plaets op zich zelfs, van tijd tot tijd gestelde bediendes zulke onregtvaardigheeden door hun boos en quaadaerdig gemodst gesteldheijd gepleegd dat de inwoonders zoo als bevoorens verscheide maelen bij een verzameld en hunne bezwaeren teegens dezelve hebben ingebraegt zoo als daerop bij die geleegdheden ook billijk recht geschied is.

Zeedert die en nu wel van verscheide jaeren op voordragen zijn in onheilen en meeder waeren met geduld om dat ze zig in de noodzaaklijkheid bevinden in hun land te blijven. Dit zoo zijnde weet men niet of de Singalesche porta bediendens en tolken van den teegenwoordig over ons gestelde heer Matresche groot dessave; aan zijn edele de zaeken en gewoontens des lands goed of kwaed die kunnen of niet kunnen bestaan, na behooren te kenne geeven zoo als zij wel verpligt zijn te doen wijl na dat zijn Ed getreden is in desselfss bestier alle de inwoonders groot en klein mannen en vrouwen zonder onderscheid van perzoons in een korles en pattoes van de dessvonij veele kastijdinge, pijn, smerten, nadeel en ongerechtigheeden en meenigte opzichte hebben moeten lijden. Bij het ondergaan van alle deeze rampen en voort duuringen bekooren van hunne verdraegzaameheid, heeft men nu zedert agt maenden ruim succesievelijk tot het herstellen van een dam geleege te Baddegierie didoor de reuzen ten tijde van de eerste koning deezer eilande is gestigd dog zeedert vervallen en verlaeten geworden,

alzo ten tijde van dier oprichting een groot hongersnood in het land is veroorzakten schoon deeze plaats zeer verre van de hand legd, veel volk derwaers gezonden dat meest door koortsen en meer andere ziekten aengetast zijden aldaer zelfs en voor het overige terugkoomende onder weeg en dertens na hunne komste hunne woondorpen zelve overleeden en buiten die aelle de inwoonders van de korles en pattoes der matureesche dessavonij uitgezonderd zoo jonge als oude aenbevoolen na de sterkte van elks huisgezin alwaere het thien man of rato sterkt als elk dezelve zijn zoude, zo dat een van hun ager blijven mogte na Baddegirie voormeld teegen den 15 deezer van hun woonpleatigen te verstrekken, een ieder voorsien van hun eige onderhoud voor een maend en voren de verdere tot dienst benoodigde kovijtas inchiados ectra

Wijl wij een zodaenig order hebben bekoomen waerbij wij niets anders te bedenken hebben als het gevaar maer aen ons leeven onderweropen is zeer wel onderricht en ook gezien hebbende hoe het hun wederwerig is die voor onzer na toegegaen zijn, zijn we om naer zodenig een plaats te gaan zeer bevreed om de wille van voorsch meeder waardigheeden, hebben wij voorgenoomen alle de zelve te kunnen te geeven aen goede heeren Rechters in vertrouwen of het zomwijlen van dien uit werking mogte zijn, dat wij billijk recht verkrijgen in deeze gedachten zijnde de kleene hoofden en alle zingezeetenen van deeze desavonij bij een vergaderd, zonder eenige inzicht egter om teegen de Ede Komp of de heeren magten des lands eenig nadeel toetebrengen. Wij blijven zodenig onderwerpelijk om onze zaek te kennen te geeven schoon ons ter vooren is gekoomen dat wij daertoe geene gelegenheid zouden erlangen verzoekende zeer nodig en ootmoeding u wel edel achtabare het een en andere tewillen brengen onder het oog van den wel edele gestrengen groot achteren heer Ceilons gouverneur en dat op deeze onze klagten die wij alle gezaemendlijk doen een behoorlijk onderzoek en afdoening mag volgen indien in de wijze van deeze onze klagtn eenige erreur mogte ontdekt worden. Bidden wij aen de liefde Gods ons te willen vergeeven

Indievoeging geschreeven en afgezonden den 21 april 1790 door repetiëre Don Constantijn Widjesendreablenaike araetje en Gangoddegammege Don Simon Samneresinge Dodampe araetje videan van Hakman Wallekadde, uit naem van de kleine hoofden en verdere ingezeetenen vande Kandebaddepattoo Dommoelle Dissanaïke Aproehamie Bitmeraele van de Girrewaij uit naem van de overige Bitmerael's naggeaetjes, Badamas en meer ander ingezeetenen uit de Girerwaijpattoe, Marakadde abjesirie Sammereseegere en pallatere Abejediere Goenetilleke Araetje uit naem van de volkeren gehoorende onder de vier Rusthuijzen der Girrewaijpattoe sierierat Ramerwikkaeme pattoene araetje uit naemn van alle de kleene hoofden van de Gangebaddepattoo Don Bastiaan Hikkaemeratje goenesegere areetje uit naem van de laskorijns van de Wellebaddepattoo Don Samuel Abegoewardene koddietoeaë araetje uit naem van de laskorijns van de koditoeakoe madoe Wimelegoesegere Badagamme araetje uit naemn van de kleene hoofden en inwoonders van de vier Baijgams, Rattoewene Aanatte Abejesuige Jajewardene Araetje uit naemn van de kleene hoofden en inwoonders van de dopren

Kreeme, kattoene en oedoebarke Jajaerwickreme Roepesinge korl araetje uit naem van de mindere hoofden en ingezeetenen van de Belligam corl

Aan het hoofd der oa /: was getekend met elf Singaleesche handteekeningen geschreeven in onleesaare Nederduitse letters en Singaleese karakters /: onder stond:/ voor de translatie Gale de 22 April 1790 /: was getekend :/ M J Gratiaan e.g. klerk /: in margine :/ voor de vertaeling /: geteekend:/ S de Zilva gezw tolk:/ laeger:/ akkordeert /: was getekend J.A. Brechman g: klerk

Translation of a Sinhalese letter-ola dated 21 April 1790 on behalf of and from minor headmen and Sinhalese subjects and inhabitants of the Matara dessavony written to the noble and honourable lord Commander of Galle and Matara.

After prior compliments,

During the rule of his majesty the king of Kandy, Rajasinha [II] when he wished to take this land from the hands of the Portuguese and hand it over to the Dutchmen and after receiving his majesty's highest commands, were the Portuguese expelled with help of both the Dutchmen and the king's subjects. Afterwards, the former rights of the king are again interiorized and attributed, without any changes, according to the treaty, and the Dutchmen became entitled to the low lands. Hereupon many years have peacefully passed thanks to the maintenance and delight of all the privileges that have priory been custom, but since the Dutchmen have appointed in every place and even from time to time, servants at the porta who commit injustice with their mad and evil mind, the inhabitants ought to do what they had done before, [that is] coming together and submit complaints against these persons and this has resulted in acceptable jurisdiction.

Since that and now has several years past full of misery and this asked patience, because they found it necessary to stay on their own soil. Being so, not knowing if the Sinhalese porta servants and translators of our current appointed lord *dessava* of Matara know the affairs and customs of this country well or bad and if they are doing their job properly, now the noble lord started his government all the inhabitants, big and small, men and women, without any distinction, in corles and pattus of the dessavony have suffered many punishments, pain, sorrows, disadvantages, and injustices. While experiencing all these disasters and the continuation of their endurance, people are now since eight months successively been restoring the dam in the Badagiriya that has been built by giants during the reign of the first king of the island, but since the erection has become a ruin and is abandoned as a famine took place because this area was far away from the [people's] soil, [now] many people have been sent to this place, where many

of them are attacked by fever and other sickness and died over there, others died during their journey back, while thirdly the ones who eventually arrived back in their villages died there and all the inhabitants of the corles and pattus from the Matara dessavony are ordered [now to go to Badagiriya] - except the young and old people - while looking at the amount of the family members even when they were with ten people, to only let one member stay behind, and all the others leaving their homes Badagiriya-bound around the 15th of this [month, April], bringing their own goods for their upkeep for a month as well as necessary work tools.

After we heard this command, of which we could not think something else than a danger for our own lives, being informed and even having seen the condition of the ones coming back, we are very scared to go to such a place. Because of this, we envisioned trusting all this to just judges to receive fair justice. With this in mind, the minor headmen and all the inhabitants of this *dessavony* came together, without any intention to resist against the noble Company or to inflict any disadvantage to the lords' powers in this land.

We continue to subdue ourselves to inform about our case although we have heard that it is said that we did not want to make use of this opportunity, we request you very persistently and humble to share one and another with of the very noble and respectable lord Governor of Ceylon and that on these our complaints a proper investigation will be started and that on our complaints a settlement will follow, we pray if in our complaint any error occurs you will forgive us with the love of God.

In the side-line written and sent on 21 April 1790 by Repetiere Don Constantijn Widjesendreablenaike arachchi and Gangoddegammege Don Simon Samneresinge Dodampe arachchi vidane of Hakmana Wallekadde, on behalf of the minor headmen and other inhabitants of the Kandabodapattu, Dommoelle Dissanaike Aproehamice bitmerael of the Giruwaya on behalf of other bitmerael, wahatjes, badamas and other inhabitants of the Giruwayapattu, Marakadde Abjesirie Sammereseegere and Pallatere Abejediere Goenilleke arachchi on behalf of the people belonging to the four rest houses of the Giruwayapattu, Sierierat Ramerwikkaeme Pattoene arachchi on behalf of the minor headmen of the Gangabodapattu, Don Bastiaan Hikkaemeratje Goenesegere arachchi on behalf of the lascorins of the Wellabodapattu, Don Samuel Abegoenewardene *koditoeak* arachchi on behalf of the lascorins of the koditoeak residence, Wimelegoenesegere Badagamme arachchi on behalf of the minor headmen and inhabitants of the four Baygams, Rattoewene Aanatte Abejesuige Jajewardene arachchi on behalf of the minor headmen and inhabitants of the villages Kirama, Katuwana and Urubokka, Jajaerwickreme Roesinghe corle arachchi on behalf of the minor headmen and inhabitants of the Weligama corle

The ola was signed at the top with eleven Sinhalese signatures, written in illegible *Nederduits* letters and Sinhalese characters, underneath: translated in Galle on 22 April 1790, signed by M.J. Gertiaan,

clerk - in the margin: for translation: signed by S. de Zilva sworn translator. Approved: signed by J.A. Brechman, sworn clerk.

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755, 1515, 1566, 2159, 2908, 2912, 2913, 2914

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