



ASVATHI TIRUNAL

Rani of Attingal (r.1677-1698)

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Introduction.

Kerala, earlier known as Malabar, is an area that lies on the west coast of the Indian peninsula and can be seen as a totally different region than other areas in India. One of the causes of this is the mountain-range of the West-Ghats. This mountainous landscape forms a sharp secretion between the humid coastal area of Kerala and the dry hinterlands. This makes Kerala a fertile landscape for the growing of crops. The land is intersected by a network of rivers on which export products can easily be transported from the inland to the coast. Seventeenth-century Kerala was a mosaic of small realms that were segmentary in nature, of which the highest concentrations of people were found at the harbour cities and temple areas in the South.¹

One of those temples was the Padmanabhaswamy Temple, also known as ‘the Golden Temple’. Nowadays it still plays an important role in the area. The temple was probably built in the eight century and was situated in Thiruvananthapuram, a city that was part of the kingdom of Travancore. This kingdom was an overarching construct that consisted of different principalities, of which Venad was one of the main principalities.² The king of Travancore was traditionally the head of the Padmanabhaswamy Temple or better known as the *kulasekhara perumal*. He was member of the council that administrated the temple.³

In the seventeenth century, Travancore was one of the roughly four kingdoms in which Kerala was divided. The other kingdoms were those of the Zamorin, ruler of Calicut, of the king of Kolathiri and of the king of Cochin.

The dynasty of Travancore was divided over three families, or *svarumpams*. These were the Trippappur *svarupam*, Jayasimhanad *svarupam* and Cheraway *svarupam*. The first one was the most important *svarupam*, because it ruled over the centre principality Venad and the principality of Attingal. The princes of the principality of Nedumangadu were another branch in this same *svarupam*. The princes of the second *svarupam*, Jayasimhanad, were rulers of the principality of Quilon. And the princes from the last *svarupam* were ruling over the principalities of Karungappalli, Kartiganappilli, Kayamkulam and Panappelli.⁴

¹ Piet Emmer and Jos Gommans, *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld: De geschiedenis van Nederland overzee 1600-1800* (Amsterdam 2012), 332-333; Mark de Lannoy, *The kulasekhara perumals of Travancore: History and state formation in Travancore from 1671 to 1758* (Leiden 1997), iii.

² In literature about the kingdom, the names Travancore and Venad are often used interchangeably. Therefore, it is not always clear if the overarching kingdom or the centre principality is meant. In this paper, I choose to hold on to the distinction that Mark de Lannoy that the uses in his book *The kulasekhara perumals of Travancore* (1997).

³ Krishnat Padmanabha Menon, *A history of Kerala, written in the form of notes on Visscher's letters from Malabar* (Ernakulam 1924), 1.

⁴ De Lannoy, *The kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, table 1-6.

Figure 1 General map of seventeenth-century Kerala



Source: Mark de Lannoy (1997)

It is not known how Venad originated. But according to Padmanabha Menon, about 1304 C.E. two princesses of a disrupted empire that was situated in Kerala established the principality of Attingal. This was around the same time that other princes and princesses established themselves in the area.⁵ As a principality, Attingal was an important link in the complicated political landscape of Venad, with its own unique function.

The principality of Attingal was ruled by women for more than 400 years. The *rani* of Attingal was the head of her principality and the eldest woman of the Trippapur *svarupam*. That meaning was specifically applied to the *ranis* of Attingal, in other parts of India this word had another definition. Because Travancore knew a *marumakkathayam* or matrilinear form of succession, the *rani* of Attingal had a special position. This meant that the eldest son of the *rani* was the first successor for the throne of Travancore. His brothers and sisters were seated on the

⁵ De Lannoy, *The kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, iii-v.

thrones of the other principalities. Therefore, the *rani* of Attingal could be seen as the mother of most of the royals in Travancore, and was succeeded by her own eldest daughter.⁶

Most literature on the political system of seventeenth century Kerala focuses on the role of Venad, for its central position in the kingdom of Travancore. By doing this, the special position of the *rani* of Attingal is often mentioned. But unfortunately, the descriptions of the *ranis* of Attingal also often end here. By doing this, the position of the *rani* of Attingal is displayed as only a motherly role for the kingdom, while it contains so much more in reality. This is problematic, because in this way important details on the political power structures of Kerala are overlooked. Also, the special contribution of these women to the political landscape of the area is denied. That is why more research on the position of the *ranis* of Attingal in Kerala is needed.

Because the principality of Attingal was ruled by women for 400 years, the amount of information on the individual *ranis* is not divided evenly. Therefore, this research contains a case-study of the reigning period of only one of them. In this paper, the reigning period of the *rani* Asvathi Tirunal will be analysed. Because she was a temporary regent of Travancore, a situation that rarely occurred, her story is not generalizable for all *ranis* of Attingal. But her period of reign shows us what the possibilities of these women were in the political field of seventeenth-century Kerala. The main question of this paper is the following: ‘To what extent did Asvathi Tirunal (r.1677-1698) exercise political power in South Kerala and where was this power derived from?’

General background and historical debate

In this paragraph, a short overview of the reigning period of Asvathi Tirunal of Attingal will be given. Because most of the historical research on the south of Kerala mainly focuses on the history of Travancore, there is not a lot of literature available that specifically concentrates on Attingal. But as good as possible, we will dive into the historical debate that takes place on the independent rulership of the Attingal *ranis*. Kerala historians seem to contradict each other on this subject. Their diverse views on the position of the Attingal *ranis* will be explained in this part.

Asvathi Tirunal became *rani* of Attingal after her mother Makayiram Tirunal (r.1630-1676) had died in 1676. A year later, in 1677, the king of Travancore died and her son succeeded him as a minor. Because of that, Asvathi Tirunal became a temporary regent of Travancore until

⁶ Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, 2.

her son was old enough to rule by himself. In 1684, her role as temporary regent had ended. Asvathi Tirunal was *rani* of Attingal until her death in 1698 and her adopted daughter succeeded her on the throne.

Previously, Asvathi Tirunal has been the subject of study in history writing. In 1975, Kerala historian Abdullah Ibrahim Kunju published an article titled ‘Umayamma Rani (1677-1684 A.D.)’ that discussed the period in which Asvathi Tirunal was temporary regent of Travancore.⁷ But because he only covered the period of temporary regency in his article, it is hard to draw conclusions on how royal women from Attingal were able to influence the political field of Kerala from their position as *rani*. Furthermore, Ibrahim Kunju made no statements on the political independency of the Attingal *ranis*.⁸

The history of Attingal is partly described by historian Mark de Lannoy, in his book *The kulasekhara perumals of Travancore (History and state formation in Travancore from 1671 to 1758)*. The book contains an extensive description of the political situation of Travancore in this time frame. But because it is mainly focused on Travancore itself, it lacks a certain consciousness of the special position of the *ranis* of Attingal. De Lannoy took her motherly position in the realm for granted and did not pay a lot of attention to why she acted the way she did, and what could have been motives for her decisions. This becomes clear when he for example described that Asvathi Tirunal, at the start of her reign, took measures in order to secure her son to the throne of Travancore after the former king (her brother) died.⁹ He did not think of other reasons why Asvathi Tirunal would have tried to gain political influence in the area. By doing this, he pushed her in the role of mother and neglected other sides of her position as *rani*. In his book, he treated the *ranis* of Attingal most of the time as politically subordinate to the king of Travancore. It seems that De Lannoy mainly sees the power of the Attingal *ranis* as a façade.

V. Jayagopan Nair and K. Sivasankaran Nair,¹⁰ two historians from Kerala, look in a different way at the position of the Attingal *ranis*. That begins with the fact that they did research of which Attingal was the main subject. In 2013, an article by them was published with the title ‘Attingal: A principality reigned by queens.’ In their article, the authors discussed how the royal women of Attingal used their privileges they enjoyed as a *rani*. According to the authors, Attingal was meant to be the training ground for rulers of the different *swarupams*. In

⁷ Asvathi Tirunal is also known as Umayamma Rani.

⁸ Abdullah Ibrahim Kunju, ‘Umayamma Rani (1677-1684 A. D.)’, *Journal of Kerala Studies* 2:1 (1975) 17-23, there 23.

⁹ De Lannoy, *The kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, 11.

¹⁰ Unfortunately, the first names of the authors were untraceable.

this way, the mother of the princes who ruled the neighbouring states, had the power to create an environment that was best for a prince growing up. The *ranis* of Attingal were thus the female line of the family who tied the dynasty together.¹¹ Although the article is quite short and not a very extensive work, the message of the authors is clear. The authors make the following statement: 'The truth is that not only the queens [*ranis*] were independent but very often held authority over Travancore and other principalities.'¹² With this statement, they positioned themselves on the opposite of De Lannoy, regarding the independency of the Attingal *ranis* in relation to Travancore.

Swami Madhavananda and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, editors of *Great women of India* (1953) would have agreed with the above authors. They claimed that the Attingal *ranis* were independent and not subject to the control of Travancore. On top of that, they quoted a Dutch commander who mentioned that the *rani* that will be studied in this paper, Asvathi Tirunal, not only ruled Attingal, but also Travancore.¹³ They must refer to the period in which Asvathi Tirunal acted as a temporary regent when her minor son was king of Travancore. But their choice of words is remarkable and might indicate that Asvathi Tirunal was more than a temporary regent in that period.¹⁴ It is also noticeable that Asvathi Tirunal is mentioned in composite works on important women of India, like this one. This means that her role as *rani* is valued by others in the history-writing of India.

Some historians choose the middle way in the discussion of the power of the Attingal *ranis*. In 1910, Krishnat Padmanabha Menon finished his *History of Kerala* that was published in four volumes. These volumes contain a lot of information on Kerala history and therefore also on the history of Attingal. In his work, he stated that the principalities of Venad and Attingal were separate and independent from each other.¹⁵ This partially corresponds with the statements of De Lannoy, and partially with Jayagopan Nair and Sivasankaran Nair. In one way, Padmanabha Menon would have agreed with the idea of political independency of the Attingal *ranis*, just like Jayagopan Nair and Sivasankaran Nair do. But he would not agree on the part of their statement in which the Attingal *ranis* held authority over Travancore. Therefore, the view of Padmanabha Menon can be put between the two 'sides' in the historical debate.

¹¹ V. Jayagopan Nair and K. Sivasankaran Nair, 'Attingal: A Principality Reigned by Queens', in: Ramachandra Reddy eds., *Proceedings Volume of the Tenth Annual Session of South Indian History Congress* (2013) 82-87, there 84.

¹² Jayagopan Nair and Sivasankaran Nair, 'Attingal: A Principality Reigned by Queens', 82.

¹³ It must be noted that there are no footnotes in this book, therefore the given information is very hard to check.

¹⁴ Swami Madhavananda and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, *Great Women of India* (Calcutta 1953), 341.

¹⁵ Padmanabha Menon, *History of Kerala*, 28.

More research on the royal women of Attingal is needed in order to make clear statements on their power. This paper brings more clarity on the position of the Attingal *ranis* in the political climate of seventeenth-century Kerala. This is done by making the history of Attingal the main focus of this research, instead of making statements by using the margins of a study of Travancore.

Theoretical framework

In order to give the history of Asvathi Tirunal a place in the history of global queenship, theories of this field are used in the analysis of her period of reign. This paragraph gives an overview of these theories. First, theories that are specifically designed to explain the political climate of seventeenth-century Kerala are discussed. These theories do not necessarily have a connection to the theories on global queenship. Then, theories of global queenship that focus on India will be explained. Finally, more general theories, or theories that are based on queenship elsewhere on the world are discussed.

De Lannoy referred to a theory of the segmentary state by Burton Stein. He was a historian specialised in the area of India. With his theory of the South Indian segmentary state, he tried to take the study of Indian politics beyond Eurocentric definitions of sovereignty. These definitions are problematic, because they are not designed for politics outside of Europe and therefore are not suitable to define the political situation of, in this case, seventeenth-century South Kerala. According to De Lannoy, the political situation of Travancore fits perfectly into the description of Stein's theory of the segmentary state.¹⁶ In this theory, the relationship between a sovereign centre and the segments of the periphery is explained. The segmentary state consists of different political segments that together form one general segmentary state. The individual segments of this state can exercise political control in their own principality, but overall, the political control lays in hands of the ritual sovereign centre. In a segmentary state, sovereignty is dual and divided in political and ritual sovereignty. The periphery of such a state is subordinate to the centre. In his book, De Lannoy treated Travancore as the political and ritual sovereign centre of the area, and Attingal as another segment.

Lennart Bes, a historian specialized in the early-modern history of India, studied the subject of female rule in India in order to have a better understanding of Indian kingship and the role of women in politics. In his work, he mentions the small number of female rulers on the Indian peninsula and their absence in lists of female rulers in world history. Bes explains

¹⁶ De Lannoy, *The kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, iv-iiiv.

how female reigns in India were often undesirable according to political thinkers of the peninsula. In his paper 'The ambiguities of female rule in Nayaka South India' he tries to find out if four studied widow queens were seen by contemporaries as sovereign rulers, or as temporary options until a suitable male could take over their throne.¹⁷ One of his conclusions of his research is the following: '*Childbearing, parenting, and thereby re-establishing male rule were, obviously, essential elements of dynastic continuity, and these apparently helped queens to acquire and maintain their reigning position, at least for some time.*'¹⁸ This statement could be relevant for this research on the political power and sovereignty of the *ranis* of Attingal. It is possible that because of the important function of the *rani*, as the eldest female of the *svarupam* and mother of the king of Travancore, she remained a crucial political actor in the area.

Stefan Amirell is a historian in Colonial and Postcolonial History, and female political leadership in world history is one of his research subjects. He studied female rule in the Indian Ocean World and explained how this area is often neglected in the studies on female rule in world history. That is remarkable given the fact that there have been 277 females ruling in their own name in this area from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century. In his paper, he explained why men in the Indian Ocean World sometimes allowed women to rule. It turned out that the need for political stability and the relatively non-rigid gender roles were crucial in this explanation.¹⁹ The area that Amirell studied does not contain Kerala, but he once mentioned the scarcity of female rule in the mainland of India. He described how the history on coastal areas of India only knows of one 'regnant queen'. Possibly, female rulers in seventeenth-century South Kerala cannot be called 'regnant queens', however, it would have been appropriate if Amirell had mentioned them shortly in his paper. Amirell his statement about the lack of female rule on the coastal areas of India can indicate that there is a blind spot in the historical debate on the character of female rule in India.²⁰

In his paper on 'regnant queens' in the Indian Ocean World, Amirell also highlights a theory of Anthony Reid. As an historian, Reid has written two books about Southeast-Asia during the 'Age of Commerce', and in one of them he raises a link between commercial

¹⁷ Lennart Bes, 'The ambiguities of female rule in Nayaka South India, Seventeenth to Eighteenth centuries', in: E. Woodacre eds., *A companion to global queenship* (Amsterdam 2018) 209-230, there 209-210. The queens he studied were Chennamaji of Ikkeri (r. ca. 1673-1697), Mangammal of Madurai (r. 1691-1707), Minakshi of Madurai (r. ca. 1732-1739) and Virammaji of Ikkeri (r. ca. 1757-1763).

¹⁸ Bes, 'Ambiguities of female rule', 217.

¹⁹ Stefan Amirell, 'Female rule in the Indian Ocean world (1300-1900)', *Journal of World History* 26:3 (2015) 443-489, there 444-446.

²⁰ Amirell, 'Female rule in the Indian Ocean World', 449.

orientation of city states in Southeast Asia and the relatively high number of female rulers from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century.²¹ According to Reid, female rulers, peaceful periods and commercial expansion went hand in hand. But is this theory not a bit too plain? Amirell warns his reader not to conceive this link as a causal one, but rather as tangential. He argues that women were often placed on the throne in areas with a focus on local trade instead of international trade.²²

Amirell also highlights in his article the theory of Nancy Tanner on the so-called ‘matrifocality’.²³ Nancy Tanner was an anthropologist and studied sex and gender from evolutionary, social and socio-cultural perspectives. According to Tanner, matrifocality is the valuation of mother roles in a kinship system. It contains two constructs: (1) the woman forms the centre of family relations and this position is legitimate, and (2) in this kind of societies women and men are rather equal in importance. Tanner studied matrifocality in various groups of people. In most of these groups, related women resided together, separated from men. The women are socialized to become relatively active and independent from men. In these societies, both men and women have access to economic resources. The mother-child relationships are emphasized and marital relationships are of less importance.²⁴ Possibly, the kingdom of Travancore is also a kind of matrifocal society.

In her edited work *Women and economic power in premodern royal courts* (2020), the historian Cathleen Sarti emphasized the importance of the financial aspect to female power. Her research is mostly focused on early-modern Northern Europe. She described how the influences of economic possession are often overlooked in research on female rule, especially in research on the premodern period. These economic means consisted of landownership, the right of taxes, luxury goods and money. This financial capital could have been fundamental to female rule. By studying this, Sarti challenged our idea of women’s dependence on their spouses and showed how ruling women used their economic vantages in order to gain political power.²⁵ This insight is important to keep in mind during this research on the *ranis* of Attingal. Perhaps their access to financial resources has played a noteworthy role in their political position in seventeenth-century South Kerala.

²¹ Anthony Reid, ‘Charismatic queens of Southern Asia’, *History Today* 53:6 (2003) 30-31, there 30-31.

²² Amirell, ‘Female rule in the Indian Ocean World’, 457, 458.

²³ Ibidem, 466.

²⁴ Tanner, N. ‘Matrifocality in Indonesia and Africa and among Black Americans’, in: M. Zimbalist Rosaldo, L. Lamphere and J. Bamberger eds. *Woman, culture and society* (Stanford 1974) 129-156, there 131.

²⁵ Cathleen Sarti, *Women and economic power in premodern royal courts* (Leeds 2020), 1-6.

Elena Woodacre is a historian who is specialized in queenship in the medieval and early-modern eras. She edited a work on global queenship, titled *A companion to global queenship* (2018). In the introductory chapter, she described the way research on queenship in the last decennia has taken new directions. At first, the focus lay on personal lives of female rulers, and literature was mostly of a biographic nature. Attention was mainly given to European queens. Woodacre mentioned a new trend in the writing on queenship in which more emphasis is put on a global sense of queenship and reputation, representation and political agency of the female ruler.²⁶ In her book, Woodacre compared female rulers from different times and different areas around the world. By doing this, she made research on female power less Eurocentric, and more universally applicable. This paper is corresponding to the work of Woodacre by researching the characteristics of queenship in a unique female dynasty in the southwest of India.

In her work, Woodacre pointed out that it is hard to define the role females played in politics. While accompanying their ruling father, brother, husband, or son, they could use techniques of 'soft power'. These are informal ways in which royal women can influence the political climate without being at the head of their dynasty.²⁷ One example of female influence is the role as a queen mother. When a king dies early, mothers can defend their son's claim to the throne until they are of age. By acting like a queen mother, the woman is protecting her dynasty from succession of another family. She is a temporary ruler that fills in a potential gap between her ruling husband and son.²⁸ This description of queen mothers seems to be applicable to the period in which Asvathi Tirunal was temporary regent of Travancore, while her son was still a minor.

In his book *Dynasties* (2016), Jeroen Duindam researches the rise and fall of dynasties. He is a historian with a special interest in comparative studies of rulers and elites. A small part of his book focuses on the role women play in dynasties, in which he gives examples of ruling women around the world in different times of history. According to Duindam, female rule remains a rare exception in the global history of dynasties.²⁹ But he also argues that women rarely played a passive role in politics. Complex connections between mothers, sisters and daughters served as a safeguard to keep family ties strong in the dynasty.³⁰ When a woman gained the status of being the head of a dynasty, she could adopt a certain behaviour that would help her to secure her position on the throne. For example, she could have sexual intercourse

²⁶ Elena Woodacre, *A companion to global queenship* (Amsterdam 2018), 1-2.

²⁷ Woodacre, *A companion to global queenship*, 3.

²⁸ Jeroen Duindam, *Dynasties: A global history of power, 1300-1800* (Cambridge 2016), 89.

²⁹ Duindam, *Dynasties*, 90.

³⁰ Ibidem, 89.

with a lot of different men, in order to make sure the identity of the father was unknown. In this way, there was no father who could possibly claim the throne of his royal children. This is called polyandry.³¹

Duindam concludes his part on the role of women in dynasties with the statement that women who held full sovereign power over the throne were most of the time second choice, in times where the dynasty could not offer a suitable man to take the throne. In this case, dynastic continuity was more important than having a male ruler.³² This is an interesting statement regarding Attingal, a small dynasty in the southwest of India, which was ruled by females for 400 years. If women on the throne in Attingal were second choice, how could they hold on to their position for so long? It could be possible that this small dynasty knows other cultural norms than we are used to.

In secondary literature, the role of gender for the position of the *rani* is often neglected. By applying theories about queenship in world history to the specific area of South Kerala, a better understanding is achieved in what way their gender affected their political influence. In this way, the history of the female dynasty of Attingal also gets its own place in the bigger picture of global queenship.

Material and method

This research brings the *ranis* of Attingal into the broader concept of global queenship, by connecting these theories to the primary source material that is available on these women. By doing this, the extent of the *ranis*' exercise of power is being studied. As already mentioned, this research is a case-study that focuses on the reigning period of *rani* Asvathi Tirunal, from 1677 to 1698.

Female queenship knows a lot of different designations. Stefan Amirell points out the problems of the word 'queen' and describes how it is often uncritically used in literature. However, the term 'queen' is ambiguous and can be used for both distinct and overlapping functions of female rule.³³ The word 'queen' is the result of an entirely European construct of power, in which in general the female plays a subordinate role.³⁴ That makes it unfair to use the same term for female rulers outside of Europe, of whom some of them exercised sovereign power. It is not clear to what extent the ruling women of Attingal have power. It is therefore

³¹ Duindam, *Dynasties*, 93.

³² Ibidem, 95.

³³ Amirell, 'Female rule in the Indian Ocean World', 446.

³⁴ Woodacre, *A companion to global queenship*, 2.

best to try to approach the female dynasty without too many prejudices on the political construct. That is why in this thesis, I decided to hold on to the Indian term '*rani*'. This is a southwest Indian term that is often used as title for the female rulers of Attingal. The term *rani* is not just a Malayan word that can be translated into 'ruling queen'. The word refers to 'the eldest female in the *svarupam*'. By using this term, I hope to overcome western prejudices of female power and be able to look with an open mind at the political situation in Attingal.

This thesis is primarily based on seventeenth-century documents from the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC)*, or the Dutch East India Company, that was established in 1602. By achieving a strong trade network, the VOC tried to compete with powerful European forces like the Portuguese in order to weaken their economic and military status. Because of their export in pepper, Kerala at the south west coast of India seemed an attractive place for the Company to gain influence. The headquarter of the Dutch Company in Kerala was established in Cochin, after they had defeated the Portuguese in the area.

The VOC Commander Hendrik van Reede tot Drakenstein saw the importance of knowledge of the political structures in Kerala. Without profound knowledge, it was not possible to achieve good governance.³⁵ With this theory in mind, the staff of the VOC started to collect as much information as possible on the culture, politics and economy of numerous small realms at the coast of Kerala. By doing this, they enlarged their chances of making favourable trade contracts. This research of the VOC on the political and commercial climate in Kerala makes the documents of the Dutch Company very useful to historians, because it contains a lot of information about the area.

Femme Gaastra, who did research on the history of the VOC, asks himself why the governments of the coastal areas of India were giving the companies servants trade privileges so easily. He explains that the reason for this is that the real political power clusters are focused on the inland instead of the outer lands. The authorities would not feel the need to protect the merchant class at the coast. Personally, I think Gaastra is generalizing this idea too much for the whole coastal area of India.³⁶ Kerala did not fit into this explanation, because strong political influence from the inland was not the case.

This paper is based on information from different kinds of documents from the VOC. These were obtained from the Dutch National Archives in The Hague. All the material was available through their online database. At first, the *Generale Missiven*, written between 1676

³⁵ Emmer and Gommans, *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld*, 334.

³⁶ Femme Gaastra, *De geschiedenis van de VOC* (Zutphen 2007), 51-52.

and 1698, were examined. These were letters from the Governor-General in Batavia (headquarters of the VOC) to the *Heeren XVII*, or the directors of the Dutch Company based in the Dutch Republic. These documents contain annual summaries of all the events from the Dutch trading empire in Asia. The Governor-General filtered all the information that he received from different departments of the VOC on relevance for the directors. Because the main interest of the directors of the VOC was making money, most of the letters were focused on economic developments in Asia. By using the index of the published version of the *Generale Missiven* by Coolhaas, the parts about Attingal were filtered. It is noticeable that Attingal is mentioned in these letters. From this we can deduce that the contact between Attingal and the Dutch was important enough to inform the directors. The information on Attingal in these letters is mainly focusing on the export of pepper and the Dutch relationship with the *rani* of Attingal.³⁷

After having studied the *Generale Missiven*, the *Memories van Overgave* (Memoirs of succession) were analysed. In these letters, the Dutch commander of Cochin gave a summary of all the important events and political developments of the area while he was in function. This was meant to update his successor on the political situation when he came in charge of the Dutch department in Kerala. Because these memoirs were quite extensive, there was more space for the commanders to elaborate on the political construction of Kerala. The memoirs can also contain comparisons over time, because the commander reviewed a longer period of time.

Another kind of VOC-document that was used in this research, were the letters from the commander of the department of Kerala to the Governor-General and Council in Batavia. These contained the latest updates on the political developments of the area, like conflicts, succession and death of political figures that were noteworthy. Every year, the commander wrote four to eight of these letters with a length of 4 to 300 pages. These letters were often ordered with subheadings for each principality in Kerala. For this paper, the letters from 1676 to 1699 were analysed. In these letters, all the ‘important’ events from Kerala were described. But it is necessary to notice that these were important according the VOC. Thus, mostly events that may or may not influence their chances of fortunate trade in the area. It is possible that events that may have had a big impact on Kerala itself, but did not really influence the trade options for the Dutch, were not described in these letters. Also, these letters from Kerala to the Governor-General in Batavia were summaries of the information flow in the area. There were so many

³⁷ In the source material from the VOC, the *rani* of Attingal is invariably called the *Coninginne van Atingen* (Queen of Attingal).

events in Malabar, that it was impossible and also unproductive to report every little detail in these letters.

In addition to these documents, some separate documents were analysed. These were the reports of two Dutch expeditions to Attingal (1685 and 1695) and correspondence between the VOC and Asvathi Tirunal. The reports of the expeditions were relative short documents, but the information-density was very high. These are the only Dutch descriptions available on the seventeenth-century court of Attingal. The correspondence material consists of *olas* (letters written on palm leaves) sent between the VOC and the *rani*. The *olas* between the VOC and Attingal are an important source for this paper, because this is the closest we can come to the voice of the *rani* herself as possible using VOC-documents. Although the letters were translated into Dutch by translators, the content of them originates from the *rani*.

It is important to be aware of the risks that accompany studying a non-European world through the eyes of the staff of a Dutch company. It is not clear to what extent the Dutch were neutral in these letters. They could have twisted the truth to their own interest in these letters. Even if they did not do this on purpose, they could have done this unconsciously writing from their own perspective.

We also have to deal with the problem of incommensurability. This term means that, due to cultural differences, there is no common understanding of concepts between two groups with a different cultural background. It is not possible to fully understand each other's culture without residue or loss of information.³⁸ To what extent were the Dutch able to understand the Malabarian culture? An aspect of this commensurability is how the Dutch reporters perceived matriarchal dynasties. This was an unfamiliar concept to people from the Netherlands. Woodacre mentions how colonial powers often misinterpreted the sometimes-significant role women played in their local political environment. Thereby, female rulers were underestimated or portrayed as wild eccentric appearances and not taken seriously.³⁹ It is important to keep this in mind while studying the power of the *ranis* of Attingal by using documents from this kind of colonial administrators. But on the other hand, Amirell advocates how queenship in early modern Europe was quite common, which made European travellers relatively comfortable to female rule in other cultures. He blames modern scholarship for neglecting the importance of female rulers in world history, which led to a blind spot in historical writings.⁴⁰

³⁸ Thomas Kuhn, 'Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability.' *Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* 1982 (1982): 669-88, there 670.

³⁹ Woodacre, *A companion to global queenship*, 5.

⁴⁰ Amirell, 'Female rule in the Indian Ocean World', 448.

The above described problems could have been prevented by using source material that were written from another perspective. For example, from the archives of the English East India Company (EIC) in the British Library in London. In the studied period the EIC was, just like the VOC, involved in the trade of pepper in Kerala and also Attingal. But the same objections as described above can be applied to the use of this material. Again, a non-European world would be studied through the eyes of Europeans.

It would have been better to take a look at local source material from Kerala. For example, the records of the princely State of Travancore (1424-1885 C.E.), located in the Central Archives in Thiruvananthapuram, might have provided information on the history of the Attingal *rani*s. The Mathilakom records (a collection of 3000 palm leave manuscripts in possession of the Padmanabhaswamy Temple) could also have provided more information on seventeenth-century Kerala.⁴¹ But unfortunately, because of the traveling distance and lack of knowledge of the Malayalam language, these records could not be integrated in this research.

Despite the objections against the usage of source material from the VOC, it also brings some benefits. By using this source material, the female dynasty of Attingal can be studied by historians who have no access to Indian archives. But it is important to make the sidenote that we need to be careful with everything we read in these sources and keep in mind that it is only written from the Dutch perspective. On top of that, we need to be careful when drawing conclusions based on the source material of the VOC. Everything considered, these documents will provide enough information to carefully say something about the political climate in Attingal.

Structure

The main question of this paper will be answered in three chapters. These chapters are chronologically ordered and connect each to a different period in the reign of Asvathi Tirunal as *rani* of Attingal from 1677 to 1698.

In the first chapter, the early period of Asvathi Tirunal's reign is analysed. This is the period from 1676 to 1684. In this period, she became not only the *rani* of Attingal, but also the regent of the neighbouring state Travancore. This was because Ravi Varma ascended the throne of Travancore as a minor when the previous king died in 1677. In 1684, Ravi Varma became old enough to rule the kingdom. This chapter is based on a clearly demarcated period, because of Asvathi Tirunal's position as temporary regent of Travancore. In this chapter, the power of

⁴¹ Check the following website for more information: <https://www.keralaarchives.org/record-holding>

Asvathi Tirunal in the position of temporary regent of Travancore was analysed. In addition to this, it was discussed where the *rani* derived her power from.

In the second chapter, the middle part of the reign of Asvathi Tirunal is analysed. This is the period between 1685 and 1693. In this time period, the Dutch decided to organize an expedition to the court of Attingal in order to remind the *rani* of trading contracts between Travancore and the Dutch Company dating from 1665. The Dutch organized this expedition because they were afraid of competition of the English and wanted to secure their place in the principality of Attingal. The report of this expedition is one of the main sources of this chapter. This chapter also provides more insights in the character of Asvathi Tirunal and how far her power was able to reach.

In the last chapter, the last part of the period of reign of Asvathi Tirunal will be analysed. In this, we will follow her actions as a *rani* from 1693 until she died in 1698. It will be discussed how the Dutch Company organized a military expedition to Thiruvananthapuram after they were attacked by the *rani* in their lodgement in Thengapattanam. Also, the motives for crowning Kerala Varma as king of Travancore will be analysed. In addition, the diminishing power of Asvathi Tirunal, due to her altering military and economic position will be discussed. Finally, the chapter will be closed with a short preview on the future of the political power of the Attingal *ranis*.

Chapter 1.

1676-1684: Succession of the throne and the reason for the first expedition

In this chapter, the first years of the period of reign of Asvathi Tirunal will be analysed. How did she become temporary regent of the overarching kingdom of Travancore? And how was her new position received by other royal officials of Travancore? These questions will be answered in this chapter. Besides this, other factors that contributed to her success will be explained, such as her connection with Kerala Varma. The chapter will be closed with an analysis of the reason of Dutch VOC officials to organize an expedition to Attingal in 1685.

1.1 A temporary regent of Venad

Van Reede described in his ‘memoirs of succession’ to the next commander how the princesses and queens of Kerala were subordinate in politics when compared to men. He wrote: ‘*The princesses or queens do not control areas of the realm [of Travancore], but are highly respected and live from the yields of their lands, what is very suitable to them as long as there are men in abundance in government.*’⁴² In the case of a shortage of suitable male candidates for the throne, these women could take over governmental tasks. In some cases, it was even possible for these women to claim the throne.⁴³ This was also the case for Asvathi Tirunal of Attingal.

According to Ibrahim Kunju, Asvathi Tirunal decided to act as regent of Travancore while the minor Ravi Varma ascended the throne in 1677. His aunt Makayiram Tirunal had died, and Asvathi Tirunal succeeded her as *rani* of Attingal.⁴⁴ This contradicts the statement of De Lannoy, who wrote: ‘*Although her mother was still alive [Makayiram Tirunal], she [Asvathi Tirunal] therefore declared herself as regent.*’⁴⁵ While De Lannoy marks 1678 as the year of Makayiram Tirunal’s death, sources seem to indicate that her death already took place in 1676.⁴⁶

It is relevant to know the exact year of her death, because it says something about the way that Asvathi Tirunal ascended the throne. Declaring herself a regent while her mother was

⁴² Dutch National Archives The Hague (hereafter NA), VOC, inv.no.8985, ff237-237v: Notes of Marten Huijsman on the memoirs of succession by van Commander Van Reede to Commander Lobs (17 March 1681), translated by myself.

⁴³ NA, VOC, inv.no.8985, ff237-237v.

⁴⁴ Ibrahim Kunju, ‘Ummayami Rani’, 17.

⁴⁵ De Lannoy, *The Kulasekhara Perumals of Travancore*, 11.

⁴⁶ NA, VOC, inv.no.1321, ff899: Letter by Commander Van Reede in Cochin to the Governor-general in Batavia (February 1676).

alive would have been quite a bold move, and her rightful claim to the title of *rani* could be questioned because in this situation she was not the eldest woman of the *svarupam*. Asvathi Tirunal ascending the throne of Attingal after her mother's death, as described in the primary sources by the VOC, seems more realistic. The latter is in line with the above description of Van Reede in which a woman can only become regent in the absence of suitable male candidates. The fact that trade in Attingal was on hold for a while after the death of Makayiram Tirunal in 1676, is also a sign of Asvathi Tirunal ascending the throne this event.⁴⁷ The period of transition between the two *ranis* brought a change in how Attingal was ruled. This meant that foreign parties needed to adapt their actions in Kerala in order to continue the export of pepper in the area.

The *ranis* of Attingal and the kings of Travancore were not the only political players in the area. Another important group were the *pillamar*. They were the administrators of the Padmanabhaswami Temple and their status had grown into the position of gentry. Some of them were highly capable of influencing the political climate of Travancore and Attingal, which will be discussed later in this paper.

The young *rani*'s nephew, Ravi Varma, was adopted by her brother Aditiya Varma in 1672 and inherited the throne of Travancore in a period of political imbalance. Ibrahim Kunju wrote: '*The Yogakkar (hereditary managers of the Sri Padmanabhasvami Temple at Trivandrum) and the Ettuvittil Pillamar had set themselves up against royalty.*' The minor king of Travancore was not able to match up to this. The *pillamar* must have known this, and saw this as the perfect opportunity to gain political power in the area. Asvathi Tirunal took up matters in her own hands and started to rule the kingdom.⁴⁸ It is not clear how the *rani* did this in practice, this is a blind spot in the source material of the VOC. According to the Dutch sources, however, the political imbalance of the area was not only caused by the opposition of the royal officials. It had also to do with the difference of political style between Asvathi Tirunal and Makayiram Tirunal. Where the first is described as young, manly and risky, the latter is described as respected and beloved.⁴⁹ It is not very clear which *rani* the Dutch favoured at this moment. It seems like they were in awe with both in their own way.

⁴⁷ NA, VOC, inv.no.1321, ff899: Letters by Commander Van Reede in Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia, (February 1676).

⁴⁸ Ibrahim Kunju, 'Umayamma Rani', 17.

⁴⁹ NA, VOC, inv.no.1340, ff1478: Letter by Commander Lobs of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia, (24th of April 1678).

These events did not only matter for the interior politics, also foreign parties like the Dutch VOC noticed the intervention of Asvathi Tirunal. Dutch Commander of Malabar, Hendrik van Rheede, wrote the following statement about her:

‘The princess of *Atingen* [Arrinnal] is not only the mother of the Trevancoor ruler and the eldest branch of the powerful dominion of *Tipapoporivan* [Trppappur Svarupam]... With the present old queen is a young princess but of a manly conduct who makes herself so much feared and respected that no one dares oppose her, partly out of respect for her womanhood and otherwise through the love for the old princess, her mother; which circumstance she so well perceives that she makes herself the entire master of not only over *Atingen* that is governed by the princess but also over Trevancor, within whose bounds according to their laws, no princess can set her foot or pass over the river Caremance [sic.] under threat of loss of race, kinship and privileges, but this heroine or Amazon has infringed that prohibition and made the person of the King flee before her.’⁵⁰

In this passage, the gender aspect of the role of the *ranis* of Attingal comes to light. Van Reede described how both *ranis* were respected for different sides of their femininity. But when he described the forceful characteristics of Asvathi Tirunal, he fell back to male definitions like ‘manly’. It almost seems like both *ranis* were respected, because of their gender. It is possible that their gender also played a role in the position of the *ranis* in the political field of South Kerala.

This written text on Asvathi Tirunal is a unique piece of source material of the VOC. Although Van Reede did not mention the name of the *rani*, this is one of the most extensive descriptions on the personality of the Attingal *rani* that can be found in the VOC documents. We cannot blindly trust his description of her personality, because we do not know if Asvathi Tirunal and Commander Van Reede were personally acquainted. It is possible that his description of her character is only based on stories that circulated among the people in the area. Moreover, this description of her personality is one-sided and contains only information based on the personal perspective of Van Reede.

What this piece of text also highlights, is that there were rules in the kingdom of Travancore in order to keep people in their position. Apparently, the *ranis* of Attingal were not

⁵⁰ Hugo ‘s Jacob, *De Nederlanders in Kerala 1663-1701. De memories en instructies betreffende het commandement Malabar van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (Den Haag 1976), 124, translated by Ibrahim Kunju.

allowed to enter the area of Travancore, probably out of fear for a coup d'état. To prevent this from happening, a *rani* had to face severe consequences, like loss of privileges and getting locked out of the family. It is remarkable that Asvathi Tirunal put these rules aside and followed her own agenda. Reasons for her decisions are not given in the studied primary source material. But a possible explanation could be that Asvathi Tirunal tried to protect the lineage of her dynasty. If the *pillamar* took power from Ravi Varma, her family line could possibly end. However, these are only guesses of the real motives of Asvathi Tirunal to cross cultural boundaries as a *rani* of Attingal.

Not everybody reacted positive on the position of Asvathi Tirunal as temporary regent of Travancore. Next to Ravi Varma, there were also other princes in line for ascending the throne of Travancore. When the *rani* punished several officials who did not follow her orders when she was still in the position of princess, and on top of that took measures to control the *Karuvukarattil Pillas*, she met resistance. Probably because these officials disagreed with the policy of Asvathi Tirunal. Part of the nobility turned against her and pleaded the princes of Nedumangadu and Kottarakkara for help and together they decided to march upon Thiruvananthapuram, where the *rani* of Attingal was situated.⁵¹ Another reason for this opposition was that Asvathi Tirunal prevented the collecting of inheritance by the two princes.⁵²

Asvathi Tirunal was forced to withdraw in Varkala, together with Ravi Varma. But the Dutch sources mentioned how the young woman, who succeeded Makayiram Tirunal as *rani* of Attingal after her death in 1676, did not sit still and used her weapons *manhaftig* (manfully) against the prince of Nedumangadu.⁵³ After a conference held in Thiruvananthapuram between groups of officials of Travancore, it is decided that the two princes had no official claim to the throne. This ended the siege on Travancore and Asvathi Tirunal and Ravi Varma could safely travel back to their court in Thiruvananthapuram. The Dutch expressed their preference for Ravi Varma as king of Travancore in a letter and described their 'good relationship' with him. They hoped to be able to get a prince of Cochin chosen as the Second Prince of Travancore, because this would have increased their chances of favourable trade agreements between them and Travancore. However, they did not trust to gain the *rani*'s support for this idea. Asvathi Tirunal

⁵¹ Ibrahim Kunju, 'Umayamma Rani', 18-19. Not to be confused with the prince of Nedumangadu, who is called Vira Kerala Varma.

⁵² NA, VOC, inv.no.1370, ff2267: Letter by Commander Huijsman of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia, (June 1681).

⁵³ NA, VOC, inv.no.1340, ff1487: Letter by Commander Lobs of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia, (24 April 1678).

knew what she wanted and also how to achieve this.⁵⁴ This could indicate that the *rani* in practice had the freedom to make her own decisions on policy. By being able to do this, she had in a way the power to influence the political field in South Kerala.

In 1681, Kerala Varma (prince of Kottayam) was adopted into the *svarupam* of Travancore by Asvathi Tirunal.⁵⁵ He became the chief counsellor of the *rani* and the commander of her militia.⁵⁶ While the south of Travancore was invaded by a group belonging to the Mughal emperor in 1680, Kerala Varma created an army to battle them. With luck on his side he managed to defeat the enemy and turned the horses and equipment that he captured into a cavalry-wing for his army. After the defeat, the *yogakkar* and *pillamar* got back on good terms with the *rani* of Attingal and obeyed her orders.⁵⁷

In seventeenth-century Kerala, adoption was a common-used method in order to ensure the continuation of the family line. Princes and princesses were adopted from all different *svarupams* of Travancore, and sometimes even from one of the other overarching kingdoms of Kerala. The royal princesses of Attingal lived often in absence of a husband in their palace. Their husbands, usually Brahmins, only visited court once in a while. This could be an explanation for the fact that, in Attingal, relatively few children were born to be heir of the throne. As a solution, the *ranis* of Attingal adopted princes and princesses of neighbouring countries. In this way, the dynasty could be continued.⁵⁸ The adoption of Kerala Varma might indicate that Asvathi Tirunal was indeed trying to ensure the continuation of the dynasty.

Unfortunately for Ravi Varma and Asvathi Tirunal, the problems with the *pillamar* of Travancore were not solved yet. In 1683, the *pillamar* again tried to make the prince of Nedumangadu king of Travancore. But Asvathi Tirunal received support from the rulers of Kayamkulam and Quilon, who chose to stand by her side. This front was too powerful for the prince of Nedumangadu, and he was not able to continue his political actions.⁵⁹ While the *rani* may have violated some of the rules that were part of her position as *rani*, she apparently could still count on the support of other political players in South Kerala. This means that she was, to a certain level, respected in her role as *rani*, but they also accepted her role as temporary ruler of Travancore.

⁵⁴ NA, VOC, inv.no.1360, ff1733: Letter by Commander Huijsman of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia, (28 April 1680).

⁵⁵ De Lannoy, *The Kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, Table 3.

⁵⁶ Ibrahim Kunju, 'Umayamma Rani', 21.

⁵⁷ Ibidem, 23.

⁵⁸ Jayagopan Nair and Sivasankaran Nair, 'Attingal: A principality reigned by queens', 84.

⁵⁹ NA, VOC, inv.no.1388, ff1928: Letter by Commander Huijsman of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (April 1683).

In 1681, the Dutch officials of the VOC wrote about how the king of Travancore tried to create some rest in the political spheres of Kerala. In reaction to this, the Dutch wanted to contact the king, in order to get acquainted. But they also note that it is important to try to ‘work’ the *rani* of Attingal, to gain a monopoly on the pepper from Attingal.⁶⁰ This is a remarkable fact. Apparently, it was important for foreign traders to be on good terms with the *rani*. Otherwise, they would miss out on advantageous chances of pepper export. It thus seems that the *rani*’s economical position in the area contributes to the importance of her role in the international playing field. The economical position of the *rani* was an important factor for officials of the Dutch VOC to organize an expedition to Attingal, as will be explained in the next paragraph.

This interest from different international trade parties like the Dutch and the English Company gave the *rani* more freedom to make demands. According to the Dutch, the *rani* of Attingal and the king of Tekkumkur were not very keen of permanent contracts on pepper and opium. They continued to insist on free passage to Madura.⁶¹ But, together with other rulers in the area, they also emphasized that they were willing to cooperate with the Dutch Company. According to the local rulers, they shared the same goal: making profit.⁶²

The struggles between Asvathi Tirunal and the *pillamar* never fully resolved. This is a reason for the VOC to delay their diplomatic gifts.⁶³ Apparently, it was important for the VOC to not choose sides between the *pillamar* and the *rani*, because both exercised power in the area. This is a remarkable fact and indicates that the *rani* of Attingal was not able to reach a position in which she had absolute power. It was a case of natural political balance between different parties. Through time, the weight of this political power shifted between the *rani*, the *pillamar* and neighbouring principalities of Attingal.

1.2 The reason for the first expedition of the VOC to Attingal

The *rani* of Attingal did not only have economical influence, she also undertook military actions. For example, she gathered nine hundred armed *nayars* (a kind of soldiers) and nine elephants to destroy half of the house that the VOC had hired in Rettura, that fell under her area

⁶⁰ NA, VOC, inv.no.1370, ff2078v: Letter by Commander Huijsman of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (24 March 1681).

⁶¹ Willem Coolhaas, *Generale missiven van gouverneurs-generaal en raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie. Dl. IV: 1675-1685* (Den Haag 1971), 670.

⁶² Coolhaas, *Generale Missiven Deel IV*, 636.

⁶³ NA, VOC, inv.no.1379, ff2370v: Letter by Commander Huijsman of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (May 1682).

of influence. The Dutch servants were chased away and they were warned that their return would be punished by death penalty. The Dutch were afraid that their residence at Thengapattanam, that fell under the influence of Travancore, was also in danger.⁶⁴ From the studied source material, it is not clear why Asvathi Tirunal attacked the house of the VOC in Rettura.

The VOC were not the only international traders that were interested in the pepper of Attingal. In 1680, servants of the English East India Company asked permission for a lodgement on her grounds. According to the VOC, Asvathi Tirunal answered that this was allowed if they were more powerful than the Dutch Company.⁶⁵ In 1685, the Dutch Company reported that the *rani* of Attingal allowed the English Company to establish themselves at Rettura.⁶⁶ Officials of the Dutch Company decided to protest against these developments and tried to force the *rani* to take back her decision. They were afraid that neighbouring rulers of Attingal would take her actions as an example and do the same.⁶⁷ It is important to note that this is reported by officials of the VOC, who were afraid of competition. They distrusted the *rani* for fear of losing their favourable position in Attingal. The officials were vigilant for contact between the *rani* and the English, in order to intervene immediately if necessary. This makes reports of the Dutch Company on contact between the English and the *rani* less reliable, because events could be exaggerated quickly out of fear of the consequences. These events indicate that the *rani* of Attingal was free to choose her trade partners, and that she was playing the political game in Kerala in order to benefit from her trading partners as much as possible.

Around 1684, the officials of the Dutch Company received several complaints from realms of southern Kerala. Asvathi Tirunal as *rani* of Attingal is described by them as obnoxious, and apparently, she had a bad name among contemporary rulers in the area.⁶⁸ It is important to note that these remarks on the status of Asvathi Tirunal among other rulers by the VOC cannot be fully trusted. The Dutch Company held her own agenda in Kerala, and benefited from stoking between the local regents.

The Dutch concerns of a cooperation between the *rani* of Attingal and the English East India Company did not fade away. In 1685, they wrote that they were not able to speak very

⁶⁴ NA, VOC, inv.no.1396, ff724: Letter by Commander Vosburgh of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (18 May 1684).

⁶⁵ NA, VOC, inv.no.1360, ff1733-1733v: Letter by Commander Huijsman of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (28 April 1680).

⁶⁶ This place was called Rettura in the seventeenth-century texts. It is not clear if this place still exists and by what name it is known present-day.

⁶⁷ Coolhaas, *Generale Missiven Deel IV*, 823.

⁶⁸ NA, VOC, inv.no.7904, ff62-62v: Letter by Commander Vosburgh of Cochin to the Governor-General (18 November 1684).

well of Asvathi Tirunal. But they hoped to reach something beneficial by working her with a ‘sweet tone’. In the studied source material, it is not clear what was exactly meant with this ‘sweet tone’. The Dutch heard rumours of a permission from the rani for the English to settle in Ansjenga in order to export pepper from Attingal. The contact between the English and Asvathi Tirunal was arranged by the Islamic merchant who the Dutch called ‘Ottoman’.⁶⁹ The Dutch tried to remind the rani by letter of her trade contracts with the VOC, which were in their eyes in contradiction with her business negotiations with the English. They did not receive an answer by the *rani* but could not carry out actions against her correspondence with the English. According to the contract, she had the right to collect outstanding debts from others. The Dutch thought this was her cover for ‘illegal’ trade.⁷⁰ Again, it is important to keep in mind that this story is based on sources of the Dutch East India Company. They could have acted suspicious out of their fear for competition of the English, and therefore searched troubles after every event. It is not clear whether Asvathi Tirunal contacted the English in this case to collect outstanding debts, or to negotiate about trading options.

In 1684, Ravi Varma had come of age and ascended the throne of Travancore. This ended the temporary rule of Asvathi Tirunal over this kingdom.⁷¹ From now on, she would only function in the position of *rani* of Attingal, and fulfil the role of eldest woman of the *svarupam*. But did she really pull back, or did she still exercise political control in the area? That will be analysed in the following chapters.

1.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, the power of Asvathi Tirunal in the position of temporary regent of Travancore was analysed. In addition to this, it was discussed where the *rani* derived her power from. Also, some misunderstandings around Asvathi Tirunal ascending the throne have been resolved. After her mother’s death, she gained the title of *rani* of Attingal and took temporarily the reign over Travancore in her own hands when the minor Ravi Varma became king of this realm.

It became clear that the *rani* of Attingal was able to gain political influence, but under certain conditions. Her position as eldest female of the *svarupam* remained relevant. For this position, it was important to create offspring, in order to continue the dynastic line. Because she had no sons of herself, she decided to adopt prince Kerala Varma. In this way, she kept

⁶⁹ NA, VOC, inv.no.1410, ff602-602v: Letter by Commander Vosburgh of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (3 April 1685).

⁷⁰ NA, VOC, inv.no.1410, ff622: Letter by Commander Vosburgh of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (29 May 1685).

⁷¹ Ibrahim Kunju, ‘Umayamma Rani’, 23.

fulfilling her duties as *rani* of Attingal while she was at the same time functioning as temporary regent of Travancore.

What came to light in this chapter, was that the personality of the *rani* influenced her political activities. This may sound very logical, but there must be enough space in the political playing field to be able to do this as a woman. Without enough political freedom, a *rani* cannot make her own choices of policy. In this chapter, the sources that were used emphasized the different characters of Asvathi Tirunal and Makayiram Tirunal and how this affected their style of reign. Therefore, it is not possible to apply statements, found in this research on Asvathi Tirunal, too much to the other *ranis* that have reigned Attingal. She took risks that other *ranis* may not have been willing to take.

The position of Asvathi Tirunal did not only contain political decisions, but expected her also to have a religious, military and economically vision. That was illustrated in this chapter by her military actions, her attempts to protect the Padmanabhaswamy Temple and the interest of international trade parties to come on good terms with her. By having a good relationship with the *rani*, these traders hoped to gain access to the pepper export of Attingal. The high amounts of exportable pepper made her an interesting economic player in Kerala.

Chapter 2.

First expedition to Attingal and further (1685-1694)

In this chapter, the Dutch expedition to Attingal in September 1685 will be analysed in order to get a better understanding of the relationships between Travancore, Attingal and the VOC. These expeditions to Attingal may also give an insight at life at court. Dutch servants of the VOC went on expedition to Attingal in order to remind the *rani* of old trading contracts between Travancore and the Dutch VOC, and to convince her to expel the English from Rettura. At this time, Asvathi Tirunal is not the temporary regent of Travancore anymore, because king Ravi Varma took her place, as described in the first chapter.

2.1 Dutch expedition to Attingal in 1685

In September 1685, a delegation of the Dutch East Indian Company went on an expedition to Attingal. The goal of this expedition was to persuade the *rani* of Attingal to break her arrangements with the English, and to re-establish the old trade contracts with Travancore.⁷² These contracts were made in 1665, under the rule of Asvathi Tirunal's brother as king of Travancore, and her mother Makayiram Tirunal as *rani* of Attingal. In these contracts, agreements were made between the Dutch and Travancore on the export of pepper. The fact that the Dutch organized an expedition to Attingal in order to re-establish old contracts with Travancore should not go by unnoticed. A possible explanation for this would be that the king of Travancore is politically the official head of the segmentary state. But the lands of the principality of Attingal featured the highest amount of pepper. In this way, the *rani* of Attingal had the most to say about the pepper contracts between the Dutch and Travancore. On the 23th, the Dutch delegation arrived in Rettura. This was probably a place at the coastline of Attingal, and was situated at half an hour travelling distance from Thiruvananthapuram.⁷³ At this moment, Attingal had two main 'ragiadoors': Elembejrandale and Coetsie Madempoele.⁷⁴ Ragiadoors were the local deputies of the *rani* and were part of the *pillamar*. Before the Dutch delegation met the *rani* of Attingal, they did business with the two main ragiadoors in Rettura. Through the two ragiadoors, the *rani* communicated how she wanted to re-establish the friendly

⁷² NA, VOC, inv.no.1454, ff.1279v: Report of mission to Attingal by Hendrick Reijnst and others (October 1685).

⁷³ NA, VOC, inv.no.1454, ff.1280.

⁷⁴ This is how the names were written by the Dutch VOC. I was not able to track down the correct spelling of their names.

connections with the Dutch. During their stay, the Dutch relied on information of their trusted spies and other contacts they had in this area. In this way, they were informed on the state of their negotiations at court, and the situation between the English and the *rani* at the moment.⁷⁵

The next day, on the 24th of September, the Dutch travelled to the court of the *rani* of Attingal in Thiruvananthapuram. They did not meet the *rani* until two days later, in order to follow the necessary ceremonies.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, they did business with each other through the *ragiadoors*. In this way, the *rani* was already informed of the reason of the Dutch visit. On the 26th, the Dutch sent their interpreter to court, where the *ragiadoors* and the *rani* congregated to discuss the comings and goings of the principality. The commercial contact between Attingal and the English violated the old contracts between the Dutch and Travancore. Although the interpreter of the VOC demanded her to send the English away immediately, the *rani* refuses to do this. She despised the idea of scaring of the English in such an impolite way. Instead, she asked the Dutch to have patience and orders the English to leave her country on the term of twenty days.⁷⁷ Furthermore, she promised to pay her debts to the Dutch Company no later than June the next year. Her reaction seemed very powerful and may indicate that she indeed had a strong will and did not hide her opinion, just like Van Reede said about her character in his ‘memoirs of succession’, as was explained in the first chapter. Asvathi Tirunal did not seem to be intimidated by the Dutch delegation and was not afraid to push back a little. A sidenote must be made that this description on the character of the *rani* of Attingal is only based on source material from the VOC. It is not clear if the officials of the Dutch Company really understood her behaviour and the reasons behind this.

The servants of the VOC were questioning her word, they wrote in their travel report that her ‘say and command’ were not very worthy.⁷⁸ They did not explain why they thought this, it could be possible that they had this opinion of her because she allowed the English to settle in Rettura while there were contracts between Travancore and the VOC. In reaction to the proposal of the *rani* of Attingal, the Dutch stated that they were not in the position to extend their visit to the *rani* another twenty days, and made arrangements to withdraw and travel back to Cochin. The expedition seemed to turn out in a failure. An oral message of the *rani*, transferred by the interpreter, was able to reach them just in time and convinced them of her

⁷⁵ NA, VOC, inv.no.1454, ff.1282v: Report of mission to Attingal by Hendrick Reijnst and others (October 1685).

⁷⁶ NA, VOC, inv.no.1454, ff.1282v.

⁷⁷ Ibidem, ff.1283v.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, ff.1284v.

sincere intentions to conserve the old contracts between her ancestors and the Dutch Company. Thus, the Dutch decided to continue their negotiations with Asvathi Tirunal.⁷⁹

From the above description, we could assume that the *rani* of Attingal did not rule her principality on her own. She did this in cooperation with the *ragiadoors* of her principality, who influenced the local politics. Through meetings with them, decisions were made for the kingdom.

At the 29th of September, both parties were finally ready for the official meeting. They had some time to prepare their diplomatic gifts, and then the *rani* appeared at the top of her palace at a height of fifty steps. She greeted them respectfully and the Dutch began to present their gifts and emphasized their newly confirmed friendship. Interestingly, their gifts were not only meant for the *rani*, but also for the king of Travancore. When the *rani* realised this, she became furious and demanded the same gifts to herself as soon as possible. The Dutch tried to get some extra time, but this was not given to them. Because of this, they were forced to arrange new gifts for the *rani* on the hottest time of the day. This annoyed the Dutch servants, but there was no other option to them so they could nothing than accept the situation.⁸⁰ The dissatisfaction of the *rani* is a remarkable event. Obviously, she was not amused by receiving less gifts than the king of Travancore and felt offended by this gesture. This could be a sign of a misunderstanding by the Dutch servants of the role of Asvathi Tirunal in the political area of Travancore. Another explanation for her dissatisfaction could be that she had been the temporary regent of Travancore until one year ago. Maybe she was not used to her new more subordinate role next to the king of Travancore. On the other hand, the *rani* was not surprised by the fact that the Dutch brought gifts for both the king of Travancore as well as for her. This might indicate the tight connection between both principalities.

The Dutch not only brought diplomatic gifts for the *rani* of Attingal and the king of Travancore, but also for the *ragiadoors* of Attingal. By this, they tried to win the lower regents of the principality on their hand. This could have been functional for the Dutch in Kerala, when a ruler needed to be convinced to cooperate with the Company. It seems that the *ragiadoors* of Attingal convinced Asvathi Tirunal to be loyal to the trade contracts between Travancore and the Dutch Company, by explaining the benefits of it to the *rani*. The Dutch were not eager to give presents to local political figures, because these gifts were often very expensive. They were only willing to give these presents if the *ragiadoors* contributed to the desired outcome. The

⁷⁹ NA, VOC, inv.no.1454, ff.1285v-1286: Report of mission to Attingal by Hendrick Reijnst and others (October 1685).

⁸⁰ NA, VOC, no.1454, ff.1287v-1288.

ragiadoors would receive their gifts when the English left Rettura.⁸¹ The presents to the ragiadoors are of importance, and show us that the *pillamar* definitely influenced the political decision-making of South Kerala. In the principality of Attingal, political actors all tried to improve their influence, whereby different interests all play their own role. The local ragiadoors might have been interested in cooperating with the Dutch in order to gain political power in Attingal, while Asvathi Tirunal tried to stay as politically independent as possible to keep political power in her own hands.

After the final exchange of presents between the two parties, Asvathi Tirunal referred to her ragiadoors to finish business with the Dutch servants. She left the meeting and turned inside her palace. The king of Travancore shortly confirmed the contract and renewed friendship and then followed her inside. Apparently, he had been present the whole meeting, but this was not mentioned earlier in the report by the Dutch. It seems that this was not important enough, or it was so obvious for the Dutch that they did not think it was necessary to spend a lot of words on it in their report. The Dutch servants were left standing at the location of the meeting. It can be deduced from their report that the Dutch were not used to this kind of goodbye after a diplomatic audience like this. They wrote that the ragiadoors also behaved a bit reserved. The Dutch servants felt offended and in their written report they described how *'disrespectful the parting of both parties was and how their money was wasted on these presents for both regal personalities, without reaching their intentional goals of this expedition'*.⁸²

When they did an attempt to sign the renewed contracts again, they received the answer that the court of Attingal was not used to write things on paper, and that the *rani* would not sign their renewed contract. Instead, she would confirm the renewed contract between Travancore and the Dutch Company by sending them an *ola*, as *'mother of Travancore and also in the name of the principality of Attingal.'*⁸³ This is an interesting quote from Asvathi Tirunal, because this is the first time that she described her own role in the political field of the area. It indicates that the position of *rani* consisted of two sides. On the one hand, she was the head of her principality. On the other hand, she also fulfilled the role of 'mother of Travancore', with duties that were not included in ruling her own principality.

The Dutch servants waited until the evening to receive the promised *ola*, their interpreter was still negotiating the content of this *ola* with the *rani* and ragiadoors of Attingal.

⁸¹ NA, VOC, inv.no.1454, ff.1289: Report of mission to Attingal by Hendrick Reijnst and others (October 1685).

⁸² NA, VOC, inv.no.1454, ff.1289v.

⁸³ Ibidem, ff.1289.

Unfortunately, there is nothing known about who this interpreter was and to what extent he influenced the process. It was hard to come to an agreement, because the Dutch wanted to include the consequences of violating the contract in the clause. The Dutch servants thought the *rani* did not fulfil her promise, and decided to leave without the *ola* and prepared their boats for departure.⁸⁴ From an informant they heard that the *rani* was outraged earlier that day, because she felt cornered with the new contracts and was afraid to lose her freedom and privileges. The two main *ragiadoors* declared that this was the reason of the somewhat ‘unusual’ reaction of the *rani* when she received her diplomatic gifts from the Company.

Finally, at 30 October, the Dutch servants received their *ola* and left Attingal to make a report of the expedition at the headquarters in Cochin. They sent their interpreters to court in order to say goodbye to Asvathi Tirunal and the *ragiadoors*. According to the Dutch report, the *ragiadoors* were afraid to see the *rani* again, because she was continually asking if the Dutch had left. Despite the tensions between the Dutch servants and the *rani* of Attingal, the Company felt content with the renewed contracts between Travancore and the VOC on their expedition.⁸⁵ Asvathi Tirunal wrote in her *ola* of 6 October 1685 that the negotiations between her and the ‘captains’ were fruitful and that they agreed upon following the old contracts between ‘*our realm [ons rijck] and the noble Company [VOC]*’.⁸⁶ It is noteworthy that, in this *ola*, she spoke of ‘our realm’ when referring to Travancore, while the Dutch never described Travancore as a realm that was shared by the king of Travancore and the *rani* of Attingal together. It is a possibility that the Dutch did not regard the *rani* of Attingal as part of the formal political rule, only informal. But on the other hand, they went on an expedition to Attingal in order to renew the old contracts between Travancore and the Dutch Company, this means that they clearly recognized the importance of Asvathi Tirunal in the daily political game of the area.

2.2 Some events following the first Dutch expedition to Attingal

This paragraph covers some miscellaneous events that followed the Dutch expedition to Attingal in 1685. These events are highlighted in this section as they provide additional support for previous findings in this chapter on the character and personality of Asvathi Tirunal.

⁸⁴ NA, VOC, inv.no.1454, ff.1290: Report of mission to Attingal by Hendrick Reijnst and others (October 1685).

⁸⁵ NA, VOC, inv.no.1454, ff.1291.

⁸⁶ NA, VOC, inv.no.1429, ff.1356: *Ola* in the shape of a contract written by the *rani* of Attingal to Commander Vosburgh (6 October 1685).

After the death of the king of Travancore in 1688, the prince of Nedumangadu performed the ceremonies around this event. Despite her unsuccessful attempts to prevent this from happening, Asvathi Tirunal was forced to accept her loss according to the Dutch Company. On this special occasion, the prince of Nedumangadu received the sword of Pula de Bariate.⁸⁷ But why was she not allowed to perform this ceremony by herself? The Pula de Bariate was the hereditary general of Attingal.⁸⁸ It seems like Asvathi Tirunal was not able to resist his decision. Therefore, this Pula de Bariate must have had quite a powerful position in the local politics.

In May 1689, the Dutch in Cochim received an *ola* of the *rani* of Attingal, that the English were leaving her land. It seems that it took the *rani* four years to carry out the agreements which were established during the Dutch expedition of 1685. This might indicate she did not feel intimidated enough by the Dutch to immediately follow their agreements. But there must be a reason why she finally decided to fulfil their agreement.

In 1693, the Dutch VOC documents reported a decline in amounts of exported pepper from the south of Kerala. They attributed this to an increased danger on the roads because of frictions between the *rani* of Attingal and surrounding kingdoms.⁸⁹

The prince of Kayamkulam was in trouble because he made Asvathi Tirunal angry by speaking ill of her in the surrounding kingdoms. She was so mad, that she attacked him with a knife in her hand. He slipped through the cracks and flew away to his own lands, Mangara, nearby the court of the queen of Quilon. The *rani* of Attingal was not comfortable with this idea and ordered Kerala Varma to go into war with the kingdoms of Kayamkulam and Quilon, to get her revenge.⁹⁰ This event shows us that the *rani* was able to defend herself in certain situations, because she wore a knife. It may also indicate that she was on her guard, and never knew when she would need to protect herself, or even expected hostile actions against her. Either she did not have her own guards, or she did not trust them enough in order to walk around without carrying weapons by herself. It is important to keep in mind that this event in the Dutch source material might only have been based on circulating stories, and it is not clear if this incident really happened.

⁸⁷ Coolhaas, *Generale missiven Deel V*, 242-243.

⁸⁸ NA, VOC, inv.no.2601, ff.166: Stein van Gollennesse's dictionary of Malabar, (1743).

⁸⁹ Coolhaas, *Generale missiven Deel V*, 638.

⁹⁰ NA, VOC, inv.no.1559, ff.312-314: Letter by Commander Wigmans of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (25 August 1694).

On the base of the events described in this section, it can be carefully concluded that Asvathi Tirunal indeed had quite a forceful character. She used her voice when she did not agree on certain decisions. But it also became clear that this not always worked for her. Therefore, it may be stated that she did not exercise all political power in her principality. She needed to share this power with other political players such as the Pula de Bariate.

2.3 Conclusion

In this chapter, the power of Asvathi Tirunal in the middle period of her reign as *rani* was analysed. In addition to this, it was discussed where the *rani* derived her power from. She was not a temporary regent of Travancore anymore, and had to give up some of the privileges that accompanied this position to Ravi Varma. It was also analysed how Asvathi Tirunal acted in the position of *rani* of Attingal towards possible trade partners.

It became clear that the principalities of Travancore and Attingal were tightly connected. It seems that Asvathi Tirunal sometimes struggled with the distribution of power in the *svarupam*. Until 1684, she was the temporary regent of Travancore, but needed to take a step back when Ravi Varma was of age. This could explain her irritated attitude during the Dutch visit. She seemed to hold tightly to her powerful position as eldest female member of the *svarupam*, as if she was afraid of losing her freedom and privileges.

In her own principality, Asvathi Tirunal turned out not to be the only one with political influence. In meetings with the *ragiadoors* of her principality she received political advice from them. These *ragiadoors* were not always on the hand of the *rani*, they sometimes pursued their own agenda containing agreements with for example the Dutch Company in order to earn private gifts.

What is seen in this chapter as well as in the first, is that the character of Asvathi Tirunal is described as forceful. It is important to take into account that statements on her character in this paper are only based on the view of Dutch VOC officials. But it is also based on standalone references of different Dutch officials through the years, what makes the statements on the character of the *rani* more likely to be true.

Chapter 3.

1695-1698: Second expedition to Attingal, death of Asvathi Tirunal and a small preview of the following decades.

In this chapter, the second Dutch expedition to Attingal, that took place in 1695, will be analysed. Also, the crowning of Kerala Varma will be discussed and how that can provide information on the political structures of the area. The chapter will be closed with a small preview of events of the following decades in Attingal, until the principality came fully under control of Travancore and the *rani* did not have the rights to make independent decisions anymore.

3.1 The attack on Thengapattanam

In 1693, Asvathi Tirunal gave the English permission to build a fort at Anjengo. A part of the *pillamar* were not amused by this decision. The *pillamar* of Attingal were at this moment divided between the Dutch and the English. Nair and Nair describe how Asvathi Tirunal remained unchallenged, despite the dividedness of her gentry.⁹¹

In 1694, the Dutch logement in Thengapattanam was attacked by two *ragiadoors* and 50 *nayars*. The Dutch resident was imprisoned and killed by them, and the lodgement was robbed. Among the stolen goods was an elephant that the Dutch brought from Ceylon (nowadays Sri Lanka) as a gift for the prince of Zamorin. Although they did not know what was the reason for this attack, the Dutch Company thought that it was done under command of Asvathi Tirunal. This became clear after they had contacted her over the events. Therefore, they demanded punishment for the involved *nayars* and a restitution of the stolen property.⁹²

In an *ola* to the Dutch Commander Adriaan van Ommen, she admitted being guilty of the attack on Thengapattanam and gave an explanation. But she did not mention any regrets. The attack on Thengapattanam was an action of revenge to the VOC after a servant of the Company had assaulted Asvathi Tirunal. In her *ola*, she described how the servant had sold canons to Quilon, who used these weapons in conflict with Attingal. With her revenge, the *rani*

⁹¹ Jayagopan Nair and Sivasankaran Nair, 'Attingal: A principality reigned by queens', 85.

⁹² 's Jacob, *Nederlanders in Kerala*, 261; NA, VOC, inv.no.1571, ff.24: Letter by Commander Van Ommen of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (27 February 1695).

regarded the situation even and wanted to resume the friendly connections between the VOC and Attingal.⁹³

This is an important piece of source material because this is one of the rare occasions in which Asvathi Tirunal ‘speaks’ herself. Although it is translated by the Dutch and probably written down by one of her own servants, it is as close to her voice as we can get through the source material of Dutch VOC. In writings on Attingal by the commanders of Kerala, Asvathi Tirunal is often described as untrustworthy and impulsive. Reading her *ola* to Van Ommen, it gets clear that this is a very narrowed view on her behaviour as a ruler. She clearly had her reasons for actions against the Dutch Company, and was very well able to explain her motives to the Commander. It seems like she did stand her ground and did not act out of impulse, but out of need from her own point of perspective. It is not clear what the reaction of the Company’s officials was to this explanation of the *rani*. But we may assume that they did not think this was a legitimate reason for an attack on Thengapattanam, because they kept demanding a financial compensation.

When the Dutch officers learned about the attack on Thengapattanam, they also wrote an *ola* of displeasure to Kerala Varma, already king of Travancore according to them. They described how they thought the attack was planned behind his back, because Kerala Varma and the Dutch were on friendly foot after newly signed contracts between them. They stated that Kerala Varma held sway over Travancore and had been able to prevent the actions of Asvathi Tirunal if he had known her plans. In his answering *ola*, Kerala Varma wrote that he and his mother had understood the message and wished to maintain a harmonious relationship with the Dutch. At this point, a remarkable sidenote is made by the Dutch. They write that, in general, the princes of Kerala referred to Asvathi Tirunal as mother.⁹⁴ It could be possible that this assumption of the Dutch arised from an error in translation. In general, the Dutch officers did not speak or write Malayalam and relied on the skills of translators. Maybe the word that was used by rulers in Kerala to address the *rani* was not translatable to European languages, because her political role did not exist in European culture. That could explain a somewhat unhandy translation from a title like *rani* into ‘mother’. But it is also possible that it was translated correctly. This would mean that she always granted her status as respected political leader in

⁹³ NA, VOC, inv.no.1547, ff.162: Ola by the commander and answer of the rani of Attingal (18 November 1694).

⁹⁴ NA, VOC, inv.no.1571, ff.26: Letter by Commander Van Ommen of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (27 February 1695).

the area to her son, or son-to-be. In this case, she did not exactly have independent political power, because it always depended on her role as a mother.

In order to give their message extra sincerity, the Dutch Commander Adriaan van Ommen marched with 700 soldiers to Asvathi Tirunal. This expedition to Attingal had a different approach than the one before in 1688. While the expedition of 1688 was focused on reassigning old trading contracts and strengthening the friendship between the VOC and Attingal, this expedition was less friendly of nature. There are no detailed reports about the events on this expedition, but the Dutch clearly had another goal this time. This can be deduced from for example the fact that they brought so many soldiers, and by the absence of any diplomatic gifts. Also, they were much more explicit in what they wanted from the *rani*. In the first expedition, the Dutch did not want to lose the favor of Asvathi Tirunal, but now that had already happened. There was not a lot to lose in the relationship between Asvathi Tirunal and the Dutch anymore, because she already attacked their lodgement. That is why they demanded the restoration of the stolen goods. In reaction to this, the *rani* promised to return the stolen property in the form of money to the VOC.⁹⁵ On top of that, she promised to restore honour to the VOC after their flag was torn on purpose on their fort in Thengapattanam.⁹⁶

3.2 The crowning and assassination of Kerala Varma

Asvathi Tirunal crowned her adoptive son Kerala Varma in 1695 as new king. It is not clear if earlier Travancore king Ravi Varma was still alive at that time. According to a letter of the Dutch Commander to Batavia, he had died before the crowning.⁹⁷ But according to De Lannoy, Ravi Varma was still on the throne of Travancore and thus was alive at the time of the crowning.⁹⁸ As both statements are based on information from the VOC sources, there may have been some confusion at that time among the Company's servants about the king of Travancore. But it is important to note this confusion because it would make a difference if Asvathi Tirunal crowned her adoptive son to an empty or occupied throne. In the first case, she would be fulfilling her ascribed role and the cultural rituals that come with this. In the latter, Asvathi Tirunal would use her role and status as *rani* in order to influence the political field of South Kerala. In that case, the policy of Ravi Varma did not satisfy her and she used her

⁹⁵ Coolhaas, *Generale missiven Deel V*, 741.

⁹⁶ NA, VOC, inv.no.1571, ff.101: Instructions for the mission to Attingal by Grotenhuijs and Tajspil (1695).

⁹⁷ NA, VOC, inv.no.1571, ff.26: Letter by Commander Van Ommen of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (27 February 1695).

⁹⁸ De Lannoy, *The kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, 16.

privileges in order to get her will. We may never find out if Asvathi Tirunal in this situation was just acting according to her role or tried to gain political influence in Kerala by cleverly deploying her role as *rani*.

A description in the Dutch source material might inform us better on her motives for crowning Kerala Varma. According to the VOC Asvathi Tirunal decided to install Kerala Varma on the throne of Travancore after she and the prince of Kayamkulam were not on good terms anymore, as was described in the previous chapter.⁹⁹ Despite being king of Travancore, Kerala Varma still was taking orders from Asvathi Tirunal. After his crowning, the *rani* sent him to her borders to attack the neighbouring realms of Quilon and Kayamkulam. Possibly, this was an arrangement between the two: Asvathi Tirunal would get Kerala Varma into a powerful position if he offered military assistance in her affairs.¹⁰⁰ In this way, Asvathi Tirunal could make sure that the prince of Kayamkulam would pose no danger to her, and she was able to keep her position at Attingal.

The *pillamar* were afraid for new administrative reforms and loss of their power. In 1696, Kerala Varma was murdered. The *pillamar* are often seen as the perpetrators for his murder, in order to maintain their political power. But in some texts, the *rani* of Attingal is also designated as the perpetrator. The Dutch describe how he was lured to the court of Asvathi Tirunal at Thiruvananthapuram and how he had been killed by eight *pillamar* of Travancore and two *pillamar* of Attingal. The *rani* had given her approval of his murder by them.¹⁰¹ According to the Dutch, his death did not bring any political disturbance in the area.¹⁰² This means that other royals in the area did not feel the need to interfere the political developments around the death of Kerala Varma. Only of his brother is mentioned how revenge is feared, but he never realized his plans of attacking Attingal.¹⁰³

Just before his death, negotiations between Kerala Varma and the Dutch VOC had started. They were negotiating over the forgiveness of the debts of Asvathi Tirunal, in exchange for new trade agreements between Attingal and the VOC.¹⁰⁴ After his death, the *rani* wished to

⁹⁹ Coolhaas, *Generale missiven deel V*, 730.

¹⁰⁰ NA, VOC, inv.no.1571, ff.29-30: Letter by Commander Van Ommen of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (27 February 1695).

¹⁰¹ NA, VOC, inv.no.1582, ff.236: Letter by Commander Van Ommen of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (10 September 1696).

¹⁰² Coolhaas, *Generale Missiven Deel V*, 803.

¹⁰³ NA, VOC, inv.no.1598, ff.56: Letter by chief merchant Coesaert of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (February 1697).

¹⁰⁴ NA, VOC, inv.no.1528, ff.110-110v: Letter by Commander Van Dielen of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (30 October 1693).

continue this contact, but the Dutch lost their interest because they thought that military assistance of the *rani* was too expensive.¹⁰⁵

In 1679, more information about the murder on Kerala Varma came into light. This brought political unrest in the area of Travancore and Attingal. The Dutch wrote that ‘the state was soo savagely torn and divided that this realm hardly merits the name of a realm anymore’.¹⁰⁶ It seemed that the *pillamar* had tried to incite Asvathi Tirunal against Kerala Varma by telling her that Kerala Varma became too rich and powerful and had the favour of his people on his hand. According to them, this was dangerous for the position of the *rani*, and something must be done. That is how they together decided to murder him at her court. After his death, the *pillamar* shifted the blame to Asvathi Tirunal and she understood that she was framed.

What this part illustrates is how the *pillamar* were able to influence the political field of the area and play out royals to each other. Also, that Asvathi Tirunal takes serious action when her power is threatened to be overshadowed by the power of the king of Travancore. A triangular relationship between *pillamar* and the royals of Attingal and Travancore is shown, in which they balanced each other by cooperating and opposing the other parties.

For the second time, Asvathi Tirunal decided to take possession of Travancore. This was not without risk. As a childless *rani* (because Kerala Varma was murdered), this could mean the end for her family line. In order to prevent this from happening, she adopted six children. Two princes in order to continue the line on the Travancore throne, and four princesses to succeed Asvathi Tirunal as a *rani* of Attingal.¹⁰⁷ Asvathi Tirunal died in August 1698 and was succeeded by her eldest adopted princess. The two main *pillamar* of Attingal arranged the death ceremonies and a young prince of the family accomplished the ritual of burning the body.¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately for them, the *pillamar* did not take the adopted princes and princesses very seriously. With a lack of respect to the *rani*, they took more power.¹⁰⁹ When Asvathi Tirunal was still alive, the VOC described how she enjoyed the respect of other Malabar rulers. They respected her not only because she was the mother of most rulers in Southern Malabar,

¹⁰⁵ De Lannoy, *The Kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, 16-17.

¹⁰⁶ NA, VOC, inv.no.1611, ff.53: Letter by Commissioner Hendrick Swaerdecroon and merchant Jan Grotenhuijs of Cochin to Governor-General, (10 and 24 December 1697).

¹⁰⁷ De Lannoy, *The Kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, 17.

¹⁰⁸ NA, VOC, inv.no.1606, ff.117v-118: Letter by Commissioner Wighelman of Cochin to the Governor-General, (31 December 1698).

¹⁰⁹ De Lannoy, *The Kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, 18. Although De Lannoy marked 1697 as the year of her death, the above letter strongly indicates that Asvathi Tirunal has died in 1698.

but also because she was the last one from the ‘genuine’ dynasty of Attingal.¹¹⁰ Thus, it becomes clear that not only Asvathi Tirunal’s position as *rani* gives her power in the area, but also her descent. This becomes very clear in the contrasting attitudes of the *pillamar* regarding Asvathi Tirunal as *rani* and her adopted daughter as *rani*.

3.2 A look at the future of Attingal

In this section, a short preview will be given on the future of Attingal. We will fast forward to a period in which the kingdom of Travancore changes from a segmentary state into a central state. This means that the royals from the principalities had to give up their power under force.

Marthanda Varma ascended the throne of Travancore in 1729. He was the son of one of the younger princesses that Asvathi Tirunal had adopted in 1696. He succeeded Rama Varma, who was one of the princes that was adopted as well. In that time period, the royals of Travancore struggled over power with the *pillamar*. Marthanda Varma managed to eliminate the powerful nobility and the tax collecting of the *pillamar* stopped. This gave Marthanda Varma the financial power to reconnect with the Padmanabhaswary Temple.¹¹¹

In the years between 1746 and 1750, Marthanda Varma annexed the principalities of Travancore under his rule. These principalities were Kottarakkara, Attingal, Kayamkulam, Purakkad, Tekkumkur and Vadakkumkur. By doing this, his own political power increased and that of international traders diminished.¹¹² Apparently, the first principality which he laid his eyes on was Attingal.¹¹³ It could be that Marthanda Varma wanted to benefit from the position of ruler of Attingal as soon as possible, because it brought advantages. It was also possible that he wanted to start with one who was, after him, the most powerful figure in the area. Thus, Marthanda Varma’s decision to annex Attingal as first principality could indicate that the *rani* of Attingal exercised quite some power in the area.

3.3 Conclusion

In this last chapter, the power of Asvathi Tirunal in the final period of her reign as *rani* of Attingal was analysed. It was discussed how she used her privileges as *rani* of Attingal for her own political agenda and to secure her position in the political field. But the diminishing of her

¹¹⁰ NA, VOC, inv.no.1611, ff.55: Letter by Commissioner Swaerdecroon and merchant Grotenhuijs of Cochin to the Governor-General in Batavia (10 and 24 December 1697).

¹¹¹ De Lannoy, *The Kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, 40-51.

¹¹² Alappat Sreedhara Menon, *A survey of Kerala history* (Kottayam 1967), 253.

¹¹³ Shreedhara Menon, *A survey of Kerala history*, 275.

economic and military position due to her debts to the VOC and the death of Kerala Varma made her a less favoured ally in Kerala. Therefore, her power also diminished.

In this chapter, it became clear that a strong and independent economic position was of great importance for the *rani* of Attingal. It was a crucial part of the political game of Southern Kerala. As soon as this economic position started to decrease, Asvathi Tirunal was losing her allies. The Dutch lost their interest in a cooperation with the *rani* because her debts to them were so high that they did not trust her ever being able to pay it back.

Asvathi Tirunal may have cleverly used her role as *rani* in order to gain more political influence. As a *rani*, she enjoyed privileges because of being a mother to the king of Travancore. But can this be called independent power? We can carefully conclude that her power as a *rani* was not independent, because it was always related to the ruler of Travancore. It seems that this was the case for the *rani* as well as the king of Travancore around this time. The king of Travancore was also dependent of the *rani*, because she was able to replace him if the *pillamar* agreed with her. A complicated triangle of power arose in which the king of Travancore, the *rani* of Attingal and the *pillamar* of both realms played a role. They balanced each other and none of them was able to seize all power at this moment. This balance seemed to change after Asvathi Tirunal died and with her the 'genuine' line of *ranis* of Attingal, because she had no children of her own.

Conclusion.

In this research the political power of Asvathi Tirunal in South Kerala was studied. This was done by studying documents dating from 1676 to 1698 of the archives of the Dutch VOC. These documents consisted of letters from the Governor-General in Batavia to the directors in the Dutch Republic, letters from the Commander in Cochin to the Governor-General, the Dutch report of the expedition to Attingal and correspondence through *olas* between the Dutch officials and the *rani* of Attingal. In addition, secondary literature on global queenship was consulted. This means that this research consisted of two components: a research on the ability of Asvathi Tirunal to exercise political power, and an attempt to link the reigning period of this *rani* to the global history of queenship.

As was described in the introduction, Bes said that essential elements of dynastic continuity (like childbearing) could help a queen to acquire or hold on to a reigning position.¹¹⁴ The same can be said of the Asvathi Tirunal as *rani* for Attingal. Through her whole period of reign, Asvathi Tirunal was often mentioned as mother of the royals of South Kerala. For this position, she was respected by them and enjoyed a higher prestige.

Duindam stated that women at the head of a dynasty were often second choice.¹¹⁵ For Attingal, this could be seen when Asvathi Tirunal was the temporary regent of Travancore. It was only possible for her to claim this position because the actual throne was occupied by a minor. When Ravi Varma came of age, she needed to take a step back. Duindam also explained that women at the head of the dynasty adopted certain behaviour in order to secure their position, like polyandry.¹¹⁶ This can to a certain level be seen in the principality of Attingal. Romantic partners of Asvathi Tirunal were not mentioned in the source material, and also in secondary literature there was no information on this. The female royals of Attingal lived together in their palace without a male partner. It is not clear if the father of the children of the *ranis* was known. Furthermore, Duindam explained that complex connections between mothers and sisters safeguarded the continuation of the dynasty.¹¹⁷ This was also the case in Attingal. by dividing royal power between the king of Travancore and the *rani* of Attingal by matrilinear succession, two parties were created who were motivated to continue the dynasty. If one of these parties fell out, like when Ravi Varma was overpowered by the *pillamar* as a minor king

¹¹⁴ Bes, 'Ambiguities of female rule', 217.

¹¹⁵ Duindam, *Dynasties*, 95.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem, 93.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem, 89.

of Travancore, the other party could intervene. Asvathi Tirunal took up temporary reign in order to secure their family's place on the throne.

Reid's description of how female rulers, peaceful periods and commercial went hand in does not apply to the reigning period of Asvathi Tirunal.¹¹⁸ As far as it appears from the VOC source material, Asvathi Tirunal cannot be described as a very peaceful *rani*. She did not shy away from conflict if that was necessary. At the end of her reigning period, the commercial prosperities of Attingal were also not very well. Because of the *rani*'s debts to the VOC, the Dutch and English companies slowly lost their interest in pepper from the principality.

Woodacre stated that it is often hard to define the role of a woman in the political field of her state.¹¹⁹ For Attingal, this is partly true. By using the source material of the VOC, it is possible to get a certain idea of what kind of role Asvathi Tirunal had played in the politics of South Kerala. But what is harder to define, is to what extent her role as *rani* was a symbolic role. It is possible that in theory, the *rani* of Attingal was independent in her decision-making, but in practice, most decisions were made for her by the *pillamar* or the king of Travancore.

Sarti mentioned the importance of the financial aspect when studying female rule.¹²⁰ The financial position of Asvathi Tirunal definitely influenced her ability to exercise power in South Kerala. If not among the local rulers, then between the international trading companies. We can deduce this from the fact that the VOC organized an expedition to the Attingal principality in order to secure trading contracts for pepper. Because of the interest of different trading parties, the *rani* had more freedom to make demands. This was seen in the second chapter, when the Dutch servants needed to arrange new presents for Asvathi Tirunal because she was not satisfied with their previous presents.

Seventeenth-century Kerala indeed fits well into the theory of the segmentary state by Stein. But in my opinion, Attingal is less subordinate to Travancore than De Lannoy suggested.¹²¹ None of the royals of seventeenth-century Kerala can be described as independent. In that period, there was no sovereign ruler, because all rulers were in a way dependent on someone else. The king of Travancore might have been the head of the centre principality, but the *rani* of Attingal was able to replace this king if the *pillamar* were on her side, as we have seen in the third chapter. In this situation, nor the king of Travancore, nor the *rani* of Attingal was politically independent.

¹¹⁸ Reid, 'Charismatic queens of Southern Asia', 34-35.

¹¹⁹ Woodacre, *A companion to global queenship*, 3.

¹²⁰ Sarti, *Women and power in premodern royal courts*, 1-6.

¹²¹ De Lannoy, *The kulasekhara perumals of Travancore*, iv-iv.

Tanner described matrifocal societies, or societies that were based on the relationship between child and mother. The principality of Attingal can also be defined as a matrifocal society. Just like in Tanner's research, the *ranis* of Attingal lived separately from their partners, and their children grew up at their court. These women formed the centre of their family relations. But one aspect does not perfectly fit the description of matrifocality: men and women in South Kerala were not always equal.

This research studied to what extent Asvathi Tirunal exercised political power in South Kerala and to what this power was based. On the basis of the VOC source material, it can be concluded that this *rani* was able to often make independent decisions for her realm. But she was also dependent on the position of the *pillamar* and the king of Travancore. These three groups were able to work against each other when they disagreed. The political power of the *rani* was mostly based on her role as mother of the rulers of South Kerala. Internationally, her power was based on her economic position, thanks to the high amounts of pepper in the principality. Nevertheless, it is important to be careful with these conclusions. This research was only based on Dutch sources and therefore can be one-sided. More research is needed to get a better understanding of the political power of the *ranis* of Attingal. It would be a useful addition if more local sources dating from seventeenth-century South Kerala were used., in order to get closer to the voices of the *ranis* themselves.

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