

Contested categories? Dutch and Lankan tenurial, fiscal, and social concepts in the eighteenth-century colonial registers and their workings*

Luc Bulten M.A., Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands

For use only by the discussants and participants of the AISLS Zoom Seminar Series: New Research in Sri Lankan History. Do not circulate, quote, cite or use without permission of the author.

Abstract:

As has been observed for other areas in South Asia around the same time, Sri Lanka's coastal regions were subjected to a significant bureaucratic and colonial transition in the eighteenth century. This transition, initiated by the Dutch East India Company's colonial government, was aimed at increasing the extraction of taxable produce and labour. This was based on the Company's perception and appropriation of local 'traditional' systems and norms surrounding property, taxation, and (caste-related) service duties. This changing dynamic necessitated knowledge production and registration, causing an intensive bureaucratisation process.

While this process significantly increased the colonial encroachment of the hinterlands – away from the traditional centres of colonial power in the coastal cities and ports – simply understanding it as a unidirectional mechanism would be inaccurate. Through the involvement of local agents as intermediaries, and the negotiations between the 'registrar' and those 'registered', the colonial registers and archives began to showcase an extensive entanglement of local and colonial norms, categories, and conventions. Moreover, local agents and communities became increasingly skilled at 'working the system' and utilising the fluid and entangled understandings regarding land tenure, taxation and social status to negotiate their position within the colonial society.

In this paper, based on the fourth chapter of my dissertation, I will highlight some of these contested and entangled categories, showcasing how several of these concepts and categories allowed for extensive negotiation. Furthermore I will argue that this negotiation process allowed local agents to successfully navigate the colonial bureaucracy and impact the latter's understanding and usage of said concepts and categories, while improving their own position within the colonial society.

* This paper is based on the latest draft of the fourth chapter of my dissertation, with excerpts taken from earlier chapters and papers of my hand. Hence it might be prone to errors in continuity or prove difficult to follow, my apologies in advance. I look forward to any advice as to how to proceed with this material.