

Life After Death: dying, mourning and inheriting in Dutch Sri Lanka

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Abstract

In the eighteenth century, Dutch Sri Lanka, death was mostly relevant for the living. This paper explores the objectives different actors in a colonial society had when engaging in rituals and customs surrounding death. Naturally, Sri Lankan people's interactions with colonial religion also involved lived experiences with death and mourning. Not just while death and funerals were a spiritual transition, but because for local people colonial interactions in general were often with the Dutch church. These revolved around material and social matters, such as the registration of deceased people, burial grounds near the church, and the importance of religion for the deceased's inheritance. Additionally, the political regulations and conflicts regarding funerals, and the extension as well as eradication of social status in last wills, provide insight into death as a trigger for colonial coercion, local negotiation and conflict. In this paper I explore the different attitudes towards death, the mortuary politics (Brown, 2008) of funerary rites and the importance, and transfer, of social status after death. With this analysis I will show how in Dutch Sri Lanka the lives of the deceased could continue to influence the headmen they obeyed, the interreligious and -cultural families they left behind, and the people they enslaved, even after death.

The text functions as a chapter of my PhD dissertation on the interaction of Sri Lankan people with the Dutch Reformed Church and Protestantism under the rule of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). I analyse this interaction, and its consequences on everyday life and family relations, by zooming in on the different stages of life and its corresponding rites of passage.
