

Labour Relations in Ceylon in the Late Seventeenth Century

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This paper is a supplement to the access database on 'Ceylon 1650', part of the Global Collaboratory on the History of Labour Relations 1500-2000.

1. Introduction

The field of labour history has significantly broadened its scope during the past few decades: from Europe between 1800 and 2000, to the world from 1500 onwards.² Yet, a still problematic feature of global labour history is that the amount of good quality (quantitative) data for non-western regions is limited. The present paper attempts to fill a smart part of the hiatus in global data, focussing on Ceylon during the late seventeenth century. The only monograph of Ceylonese labour history, Visakha Kumari Jayawardena's *The Rise of the Labor Movement in Ceylon*, deals with organized trade unionism in the period 1880-1933.³ In addition, two studies have appeared on the demography of Colombo,⁴ while recently Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri examined agricultural society in south-western Ceylon in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁵

The present paper is thus one of the first assessments of labour relations on the island during the early modern period. Using documents from the Dutch East India Company (in Dutch: *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, VOC), which controlled the maritime regions in Ceylon between 1638 to 1796, this paper attempts to provide new insights on the population size, gender and age distribution, and the occupational distribution of the population. The paper proceeds as follows: in the next section, the history of the VOC in Ceylon is briefly discussed. Section 3 will establish new population estimates of Ceylon during the late seventeenth century. In sections 4 and 5 the age, gender, and occupational distribution of this population is examined. Section 6 concludes.

2. The Dutch East India Company and Ceylon, 1638-1796

After a struggle that had lasted for twenty years, the VOC managed to completely expel the Portuguese from Ceylon and become the sole European power on the island in 1658. Ceylon was a crucial possession for the Company, because of its strategic location for the trade with India, but more importantly, because it was the only region in the world that produced an exceptionally fine quality of cinnamon.⁶ The VOC assumed control over an extensive territorial area; the former kingdom of Jaffanapatnam in the north; the cinnamon rich lowlands around Colombo and Galle in the south-west; and the cities Trincomalee and

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² Jan Lucassen, 'Writing Global Labour History c. 1800-1940: A Historiography of Concepts, Periods and Geographical Scope', in: *ibid* (ed.) *Global Labour History. A State of the Art* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008) 39-90.

³ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Paradigms in the Historical Approach to Labour Studies on South Asia', in: Jan Lucassen, (ed.) *Global Labour History. A State of the Art* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008) 147-161.

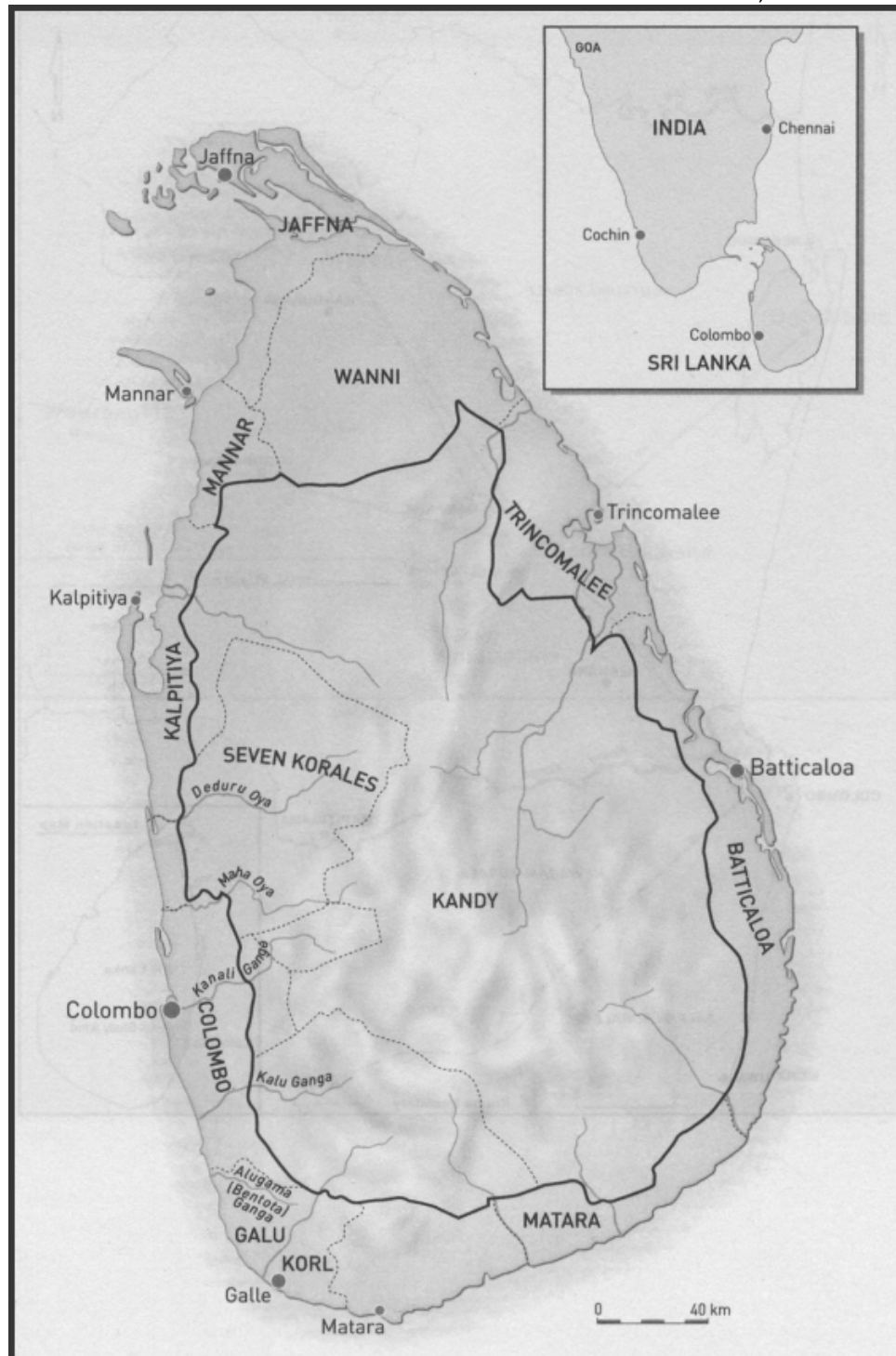
⁴ Gerrit Knaap, 'Europeans, mestizos and slaves: the population of Colombo at the end of the seventeenth century', *Itinerario* 5 (1981) 84-100; Remco Raben, *Batavia and Colombo. The ethnic and spatial order of two colonial cities, 1600-1800* (unpublished PhD-thesis, Leiden, 1996).

⁵ Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, *The adaptable peasant. Agrarian society in Western Sri Lanka under Dutch rule, 1740-1800* (Leiden, 2008).

⁶ Jurrien van Goor, *Jan Kompenie as Schoolmaster. Dutch Education in Ceylon 1690-1795* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1978) 7.

Batticaloa on the eastern coast (see figure 1). To rule the island, the VOC employed between 3000 and 5000 people, the best part of whom were soldiers and sailors. Only a few hundred VOC employees were burdened with the administration and trade.

FIGURE 1: VOC POSSESSIONS AND THE KINGDOM OF KANDY IN CEYLON, 1766.⁷



⁷ Source: Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri, *The Adaptable Peasant. Agrarian Society in Western Sri Lanka under Dutch Rule, 1740-1800* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2008) xxiii.

Yet, the Company did not possess the entire island. The interior, together with strips of coast on the east and west coasts of the island, formed the Kingdom of Kandy. It was the Kandyan King who had initially asked the support of the Dutch to expel the Portuguese.⁸ In exchange, the King would supply the VOC with cinnamon and elephants to compensate for the military expenses. Relations soon cooled after the Portuguese defeat, as the Company refused to convey the conquered areas to the King (which was the original agreement), who was unable to pay off the huge war debt. Between 1660 and 1680 a series of wars were fought, and the VOC managed to expand its territories, albeit with considerable losses and without dealing a decisive blow to the King. Mutual suspicion characterized the relations up to 1760 when violent conflict again erupted. After some initial Kandyan successes, the tide turned and the treaty of 1766 was an important Dutch victory as they acquired sovereignty over the entire coast up to few kilometres inland, and trade with the island was at last entirely controlled by the VOC as Kandy became completely encapsulated.⁹ This situation lasted until 1796, when the Dutch ceded Ceylon to the English.

The highest political power in the Dutch territories in Ceylon rested with the Governor, aided by a Political Council. The territories were divided into three provinces: the *Dissawany* of Colombo, and the Commandments of Jaffna and Galle. The highest political and administrative functions were occupied by Dutch VOC employees. Yet, the traditional administrative system was to a large extent maintained and Ceylon was ruled mainly indirectly through an elite of indigenous functionaries that headed the *Koralas* (districts) and the *Pattus* (sub-districts) in which the provinces were subdivided.¹⁰ The indigenous elite thus formed an intermediary between the Dutch high administration and the population. For the defence of the island, the Dutch military was assisted by regiments of Sinhalese soldiers (*lascorins*) with their own officers under Dutch command. When not on active duty, these soldiers also functioned as messengers, interpreters and/or labourers.¹¹

The expenses for the administration and defence of the island, as well as the costly military campaigns against the Portuguese and Kandyans had to be covered to a large extent by the income generated by trade. Cinnamon, on which the Company had a monopoly, was by far the most important export product. European demand, and thus the price, for cinnamon was high – doubling from 1.50 to 3 guilders per pound at the end of the seventeenth century, and rising to 6 guilders during the eighteenth century – while at the same time the costs of acquiring the cinnamon were very low.¹² Gross profits were thus incredibly high. During the eighteenth century an average of 550.000 pounds were sent to Europe, and another 100.000 to other parts in Asia annually.¹³ The second most profitable export product consisted of elephants which were sold for high prizes to Indian merchants.¹⁴ Finally, significant quantities of areca nuts, coconuts, pearls, coffee and pepper were exported from the island. In exchange, rice, textiles, salt and dried fish, goods which Ceylon

⁸ Alicia Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815. Expansion and Reform* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2007) 21.

⁹ S. Arasaratnam, 'De VOC in Ceylon en Coromandel in de 17de en 18de eeuw', in: M. A. P. Meilink-Roelofs. (ed.) *De VOC in Azië* (Bussum: Fibula-Van Dischoeck, 1976) 27.

¹⁰ Van Goor, *Jan Kompenie*, 10.

¹¹ Arasaratnam, 'De VOC in Ceylon', 27.

¹² F. S. Gastra, 'Ceylon als "handelscomptoir" van de V.O.C.', in: R. Kromhout (ed.) *Het Machtige Eyland. Ceylon en de VOC* (Den Haag: SDU Uitgeverij, 1988) 29-36.

¹³ Arasaratnam, 'De VOC in Ceylon', 32.

¹⁴ G. J. Engelsman, 'De olifantenhandel van de VOC op Ceylon. De invloed van de bevelhebbers op de verkoop en de prijzen in de periode 1658-1710' (unpublished MA-thesis, University of Leiden, 1996).

did not produce in sufficient quantities, were imported from India. To maximize profits, the Company tried to impose a monopoly on all external trade during various periods, such as between 1670 and 1680.¹⁵ These attempts were however largely unsuccessful and turned out to be harmful to the Ceylonese economy, and negatively affected living standards of the Ceylonese population.

3. The population of Ceylon

There are relatively few reliable estimates on the demography of Ceylon during the Dutch period. The first census in Ceylon was taken in 1789 and covered the Dutch Maritime Provinces, and the population enumerated was 817,000. According to N. K. Sarkar, because the census was taken for the purpose of taxation, 'serious under-enumeration was suspected.'¹⁶ Common belief at the time was that the population of the whole Island (including Kandy) was around 2 million. More educated guesses of the time suggested this number was closer to 1.5 million. Anthony Bartolaccai estimated the population of the Maritime Provinces was approximately 700,000 in 1809.¹⁷ A serious famine struck the coastal territories during the years 1811-1813 and the first British census showed a population in the Maritime Provinces of only 492,000 in 1814. The first population census of the Kandyan provinces was taken in 1821, and the population was found to be 257,000. Combining this information with population growth rates during the rest of the nineteenth century, Sarkar arrives at the estimates and corrections for under-enumeration shown in table 1.

TABLE 1: ESTIMATED AND CORRECTED POPULATION OF CEYLON, IN THOUSANDS.¹⁸

Year	Maritime	Kandy	Total	Total (corrected)
1789	817	285	1,102	1,788
1809	700	244	944	1,533
1814	492	244	736	1,195
1821		257		1,445
1827	595	295	890	1,734

Regarding the earlier period, a crude estimate puts the total Sinhalese population in the mid-seventeenth century in the region of 550,000 to 600,000.¹⁹ P. E. Pieris has suggested that in 1505 a traveler generously estimated that the population in the South (Galle and Colombo) did not exceed 350,000, while the population of Jaffna was calculated at 120,000 people.²⁰ This is the same number given by the first Dutch commandant of the whole Jaffna Commandment immediately after the Dutch conquest in 1658.²¹ A census taken in the 1680s puts the total population of Jaffna at 169,299, and in another census in the mid-18th century,

¹⁵ See: S. Arasaratnam, 'Dutch Commercial Policy in Ceylon and its effects on the Indo-Ceylon Trade (1690-1750)', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 4 (1967) 109-130.

¹⁶ N. K. Sarkar, *The Demography of Ceylon* (Colombo: Ceylon Government Press, 1957) 18.

¹⁷ Anthony Bertolaccai, *A View of the Agricultural, Commercial and Financial Interests of Ceylon* (1817) 62.

¹⁸ Sarkar, *The Demography*, 21.

¹⁹ Michael Roberts, *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation. The Rise of a Karava Elite in Sri Lanka, 1500-1931* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1995) 32.

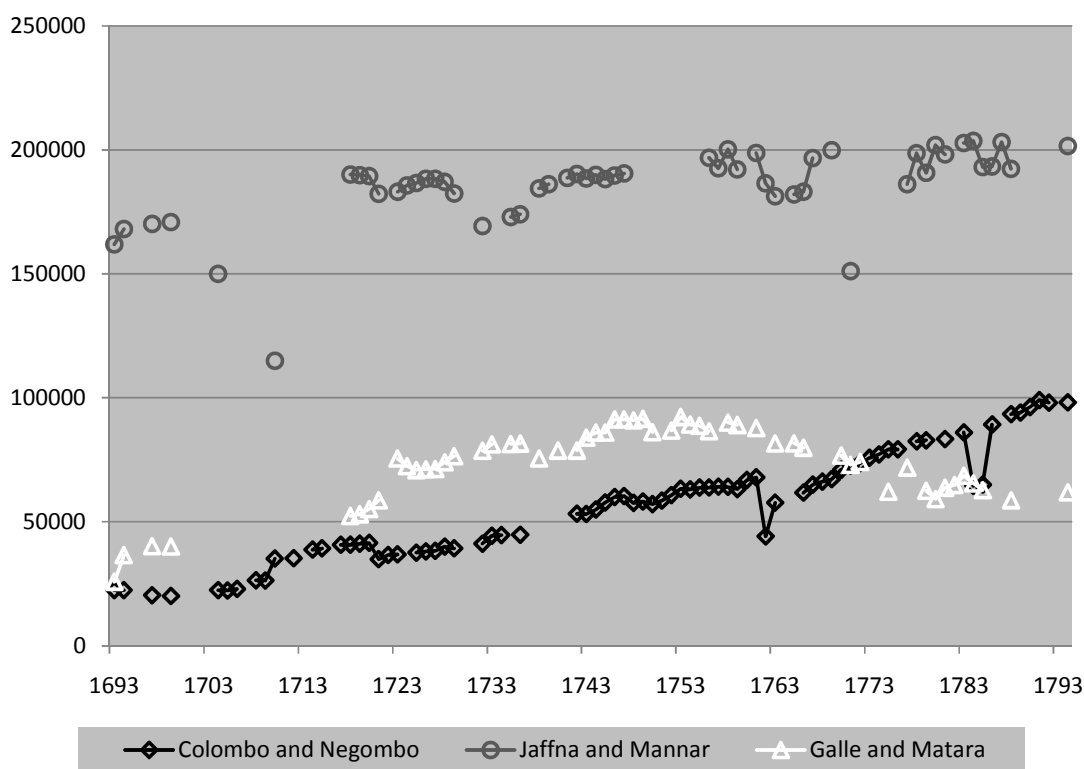
²⁰ P. E. Pieris, *Ceylon and the Hollanders, 1658-1796* (Tillipalai: American Ceylon Mission Press, 1918) 3.

²¹ Sinnappah Arasaratnam, 'Historical foundation of the economy of the Tamils of north Sri Lanka', *Chelvanavakam Memorial Lectures, Jaffna* (1982) 1-23, there 2.

the population was found to be 187,599.²² Sinnappah Arasaratnam suggests that about 85 percent of these were to be found in the Jaffna Peninsula, 'thus in the 18th century, Jaffna would have had a population upwards of 150,000. This gives a crude density for the peninsula of 350 people per square mile which was high for pre-modern communities.'²³

Next to these estimates of the entire population, there are data on the number of indigenous Christians living in the Dutch provinces of Ceylon during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Jurrien van Goor has assembled data on the total number of Christians in the Colombo *Dissawany* and the Commandments of Jaffna and Galle. These figures (shown in figure 1) were submitted annually by the ministers to the Directors of the VOC or the Synods of the Republic.²⁴ Figure 1 shows that the number of indigenous Christians in Jaffna rose from 160,000 in the late seventeenth century, to around 200,000 a century later. The increase in the Colombo area was more spectacular, as the number of Christians there increased five-fold, from 20,000 in 1693 to almost 100,000 in 1793. This growth seems to confirm the movement of people towards towns, especially important administrative centres such as Colombo, because of economic opportunities.²⁵ In Galle, the number of Christians reached its high point of little over 90,000 in the mid-eighteenth century, thereafter declining to 60,000 at the end of the century.

FIGURE 2: INDIGENEOUS CHRISTIANS IN CEYLON, 1693-1794.²⁶



²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jurrien van Goor, *Jan Kompenie as Schoolmaster. Dutch Education in Ceylon 1690-1795* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1978) 121.

²⁵ Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power*, 217.

²⁶ Van Goor, *Jan Kompenie*, 160-161; the numbers for 1694, 1697 and 1699 have been entered by the author from the source discussed below.

Van Goor warns that these figures cannot be related to other data, due to the lack of other demographic studies on Dutch Ceylon, and that it is therefore impossible to know which part of the population had become exposed to the influence of Christianity.²⁷ In the present paper, this problem is to some extent resolved by employing new data on the Ceylonese population during the late seventeenth century. This new data stems from two different sources from the VOC archives in The Hague: the first is the same source on indigenous Christians as used by Van Goor, but for different years (the earliest stems from 1692);²⁸ and the second is a population census on all Company's subjects for the different coastal districts.²⁹

Starting with Jaffna, it seems that a very large part (or even 100 percent) of the population was Christian. In a census in the mid-18th century, the population of Jaffna was found to be 187,599 according to Arasaratnam, and he notes that this 'seems to include the total Tamil population.'³⁰ This number is even somewhat lower than the number of Christians shown by Van Goor, which fluctuated between the 188,000 and 190,000 during this period. With regard to the late seventeenth century, 161,863 Christians were counted in Jaffna in 1692, while in the rolls of 'all Company's subjects', 155,592 people are counted. Taking into account under-enumeration and miscalculations, these numbers of indigenous Christians and 'all Company's subjects' are close (and show that there were more indigenous Christians in 1692, than there were inhabitants in 1684, suggesting population growth). That Christianity had spread so much in Jaffna is not surprising considering the fact that there were also a great number of churches there (almost 50). However, most of these people were Christian only in name, and for the vast majority who were baptized (and thus appeared in the statistics), knowledge of the Christian faith and their adherence to it was nominal;³¹ Hindu beliefs and practices coexisted alongside Christianity. Many converted to Christianity only because it brought new economic opportunities and material benefits.³²

The situation in the South was somewhat different. While in 1684 the sources document a total population in the Colombo *Dissawany* of 54,388,³³ the number of Christians amounted only 22,385 in 1694 (about one half). This number is confirmed by Pieris,³⁴ but very low compared to the number of Christians given by Arasaratnam for Colombo in 1722: 179,845.³⁵ It is unclear where this difference exactly comes from, but it seems plausible that the latter figure includes a larger area than the figures for 1684 and those used by Van Goor. There thus seems to be a problem of under-enumeration for the Colombo *Dissawany*. In the Galle Commandment 68,118 'Company subjects' were counted

²⁷ Ibid., 123.

²⁸ These sources are named 'Rolls of baptized indigenous Christians' or 'Rolls of Christian souls' for the different districts and were found for the years 1692, 1694, 1697 and 1699. NA VOC 1.04.02, reference numbers: 1506 ff. 1180-1182, 1544 ff. 805-811, 1591 ff. 1079-1088, and 1605 ff. 881-891.

²⁹ Named as 'Summary of all Company's subjects', for the different districts (the former Kingdom of Jaffanapatnam, The Island Mannar, the *Dissawany* of Colombo (including Negombo and Hapitagam), and the Commandment Galle, which includes Matara): VOC ref. no. 1396 ff. 602-612.

³⁰ S. Arasaratnam, 'Protestants: the first phase, 1650-1880', *Christianity, Traditional Cultures and Nationalism: The South Asian Experience. Bunker Memorial lectures, Jaffna* (1978) 13-28, there 19.

³¹ S. Arasaratnam, 'The First Century of Protestant Christianity in Jaffna', *Indian Church History Review* 19 (1985) 39-54.

³² De Silva, *History of Sri Lanka*, 196-197.

³³ This includes Negombo and Hapitagam.

³⁴ Pieris, *Ceylon and the Hollanders*, 37.

³⁵ Arasaratnam, 'Protestants', 19.

in 1684,³⁶ while a decade later 38,319 Christians (little over a half) could be found there. These numbers are in line with the figure given by Arasaratnam for 1722 (55,159).³⁷ Reliable population estimates for the two Dutch cities on the Eastern Coast, Batticaloa and Trincomalee, are completely lacking. Van Goor's documents suggest less than 1000 Christians in the former in the late eighteenth century, and around 2000 in the latter. It seems unlikely that the population of these cities together exceeded the 10,000 in total, and they have thus been completely omitted from the paper due to the lack of data.

Regarding Kandy, we are bereft of any population estimates other than those of the British for the early nineteenth century. Because the territory occupied by Kandy in the seventeenth century was larger than during the late eighteenth century, it is likely that the population exceeded the 285,000 given above for 1789. In his description of Ceylon in 1672, the reverend Philippus Baldaeus wrote that the King of Kandy could muster an army of 151,086 men. In the next section, it is shown that in Ceylon, approximately 28 percent of the total population consisted of adult men. If we assume that the figure given by Baldaeus constitutes all adult men of Kandy (obviously this is questionable), this would bring the total population of Kandy in the late seventeenth century to 539,592. Table 2 summarizes the above discussion. It is important to keep in mind that these figures are underestimates. Yet, these numbers fit estimates by Pieter van Dam, a VOC lawyer, who suggested that the total population of the Maritime Provinces in 1686 was around 278,789, and the number of indigenous Christians between 180,364 and 261,600.³⁸

TABLE 2: POPULATION ESTIMATES FOR CEYLON DURING LATE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

	Christians	Total	% Christians of Total
Jaffna	155,592 [161,863]	155,592	100
Colombo	22,385	54,338	41
Galle	38,319	68,118	56
Kandy	-	539,592	-
Total	216,296	817,640	26

Finally, combining these numbers with Van Goor's numbers on indigenous Christians, and data from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,³⁹ a long term sketch of Ceylon's population is laid out in figure 3. In order to arrive at this figure, the percentage of Christians was assumed to be stable throughout the eighteenth century. In addition, it is assumed that the population of Kandy declined arithmetically during the eighteenth century (due to migration from Kandy to the Maritime Provinces and the redrawing of borders in 1766). Obviously, this is speculation, and in future research these population estimates can be related, for example, to data on food production and consumption. Yet, lacking such information, the following figure is intended as a first illustration. The figure shows the lack of population growth during the Dutch period, as the growth in the Maritime Provinces is offset by the decline of Kandy.

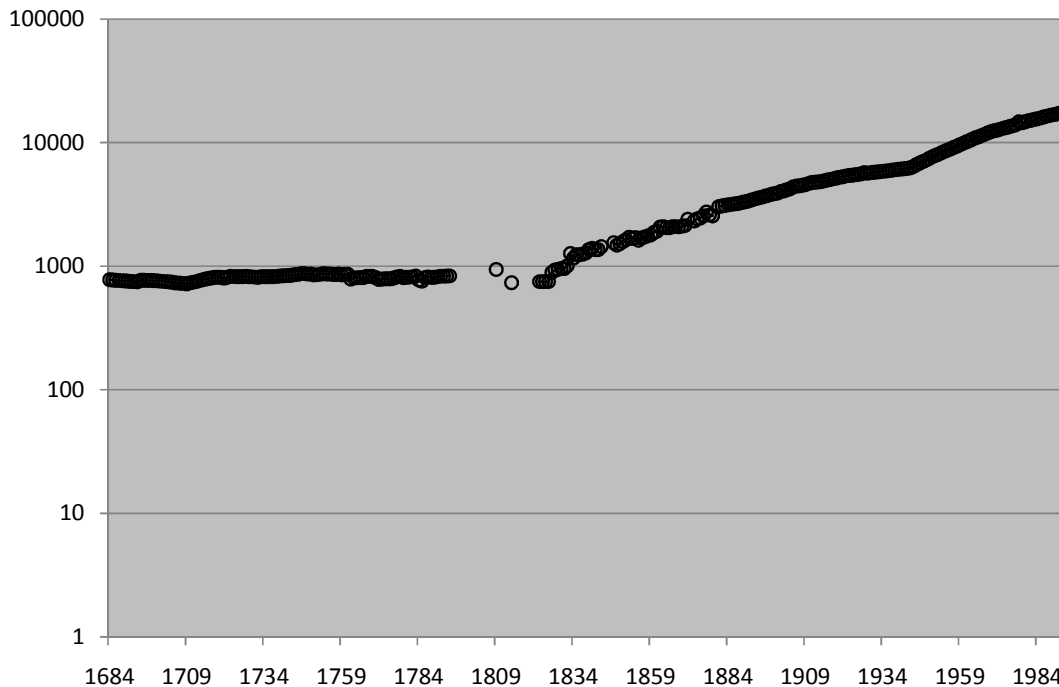
³⁶ This includes Matara.

³⁷ Arasaratnam, 'Protestants', 19.

³⁸ Dam, Pieter van, *Beschrijvinge van de Oost-Indische Compagnie* (The Hague, Rijksgeschiedkundige Publicatiën, 1927-1954) [First published 1701. Digital version available <http://www.inghist.nl/retroboeken/vandam/>]. Part 2.2, p. 314.

³⁹ See above, and Brian R. Mitchell, *International Historical Statistics: Africa, Asia & Oceania, 1750-1993* (London: Macmillan, 1999).

FIGURE 3: TOTAL POPULATION OF CEYLON IN THOUSANDS, 1680-1990: LOG-SCALE.



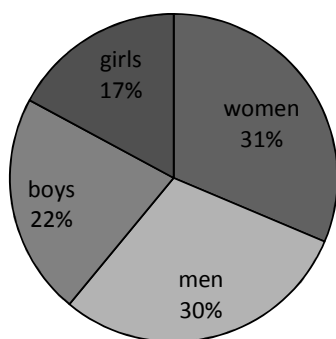
4. Composition of the population in Ceylon

Having established new population estimates for early modern Ceylon, it is possible to take a closer look at the gender and age composition of this population in the late seventeenth century. For this purpose, the same sources as in the previous section are exploited.

Starting the investigation yet again with Jaffna. Figure 4 shows that the results from the two different sources are roughly similar; with 61 percent of the total population consistent of adults (vs. 39 percent children), and 51-2 percent of the total comprising of males (vs. 48-9 percent females). That the gender ratio is skewed towards men, is the result of this ratio among children, as there were more adult women than men. This gender ratio among adults, is in turn caused by the significant number of widows. Regarding Galle, the difference between the two sources is more significant. While in the source on Company's subjects, there are almost 50 percent children, this was only 42 percent in the source on indigenous Christians. Both sources are unclear regarding what age people are considered adults, yet the latter source is more detailed (stating whether the children are going to school, or are too young to go to school; see figures 7-8). For Colombo, the source on indigenous Christians did not provide information on gender and age ratios. The data on the Company's subjects show that there were significantly more men than women there. Finally, figure 6 has put together the gender and age composition of the population from the three Maritime Provinces.

FIGURE 4: COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION IN THE COMMANDMENT OF JAFFNA.

COMPANY SUBJECTS JAFFNA 1684



INDIGENOUS CHRISTIANS JAFFNA 1692

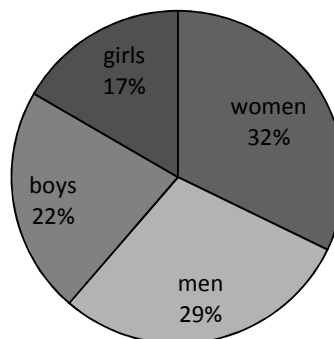
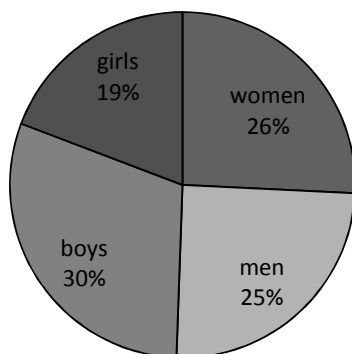


FIGURE 5: COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION IN THE COMMANDMENT OF GALLE.

COMPANY SUBJECTS GALLE 1684



INDIGENOUS CHRISTIANS GALLE 1697

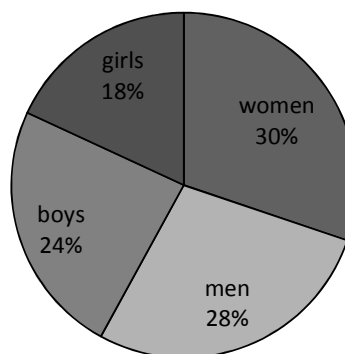
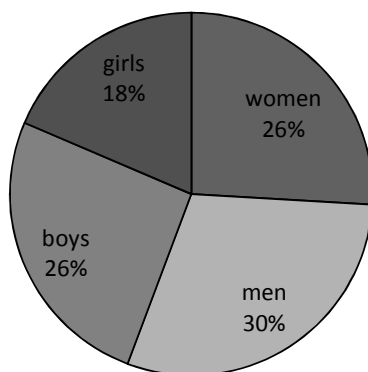


FIGURE 6: COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION IN COLOMBO AND CEYLON

COMPANY SUBJECTS COLOMBO 1684



TOTAL POPULATION OF THE Ma.Pr., 1684

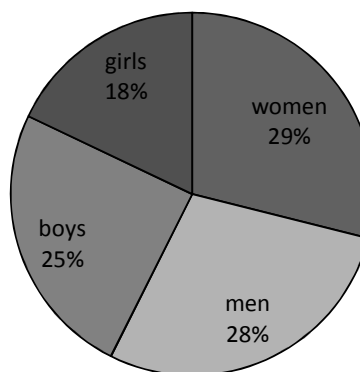


FIGURE 7: DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION IN THE COMMANDMENT OF JAFFNA IN PERCENTAGES, 1692.

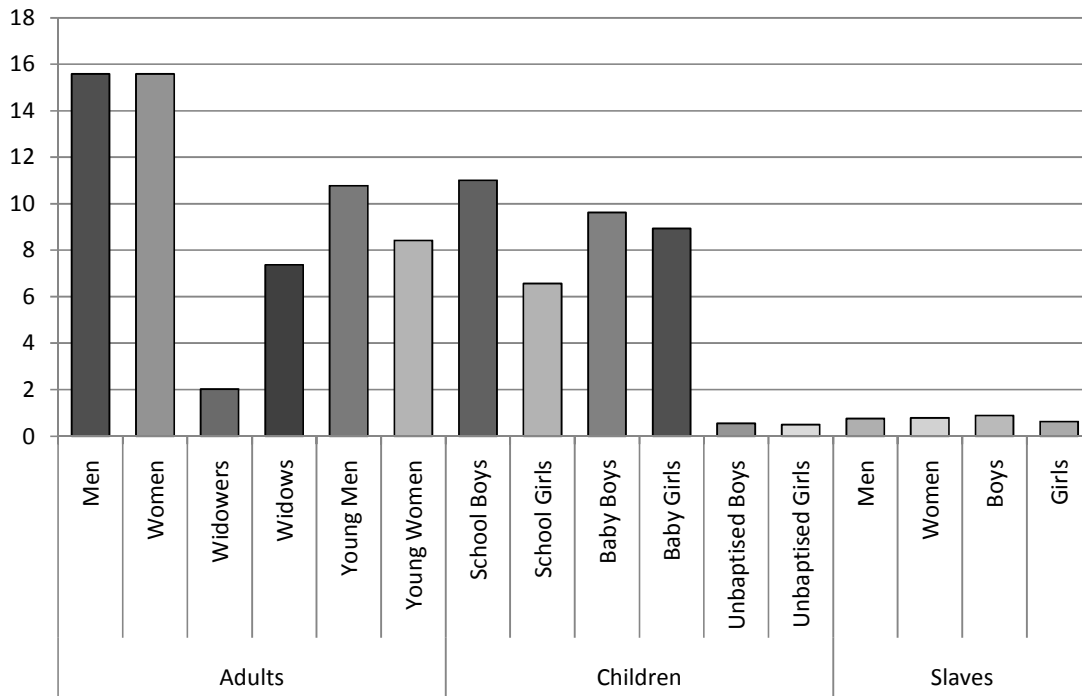
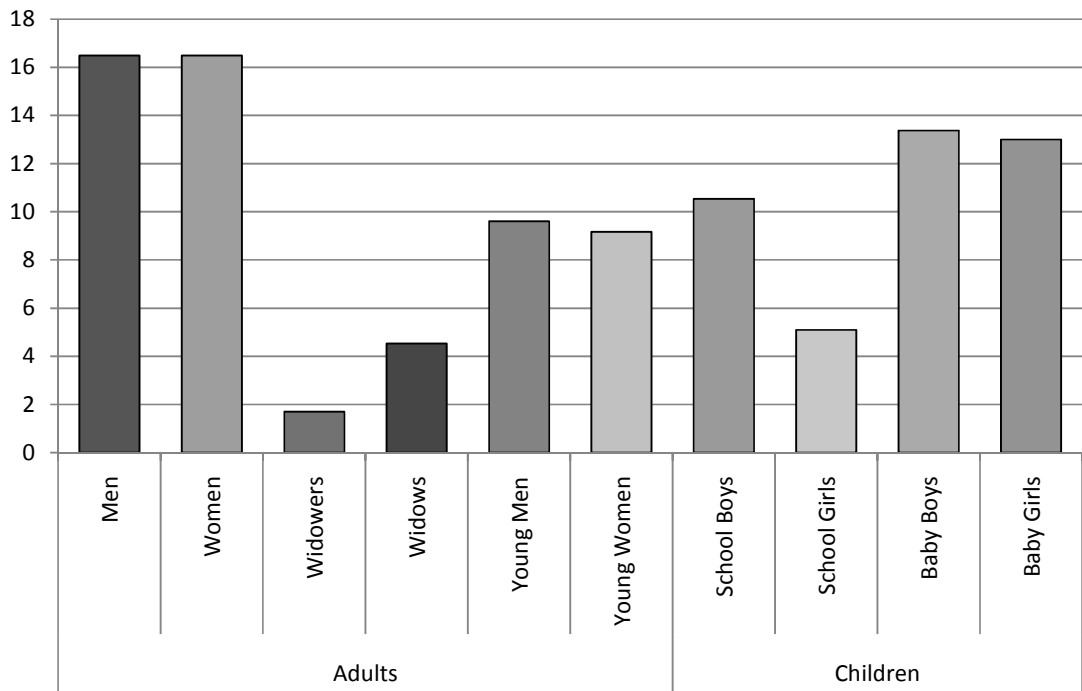


FIGURE 8: DEMOGRAPHIC COMPOSITION OF THE POPULATION IN THE COMMANDMENT OF GALLE IN PERCENTAGES, 1697.



The source on indigenous Christians allows for an even more detailed analysis of the demographic composition of Jaffna and Galle, and is shown in figures 7-8. Comparing Jaffna with Galle, one can discern much similarity. From the accounts by Baldaeus and Robert Knox (an English prisoner in Kandy during the seventeenth century) it becomes clear that women did mostly domestic work.⁴⁰ The group 'children' in this figure are also assumed to not be working, either because they were too young, or because they were still going to school. For the age distribution, it is assumed that the 'school' age of boys and girls was the same as in the Dutch Republic at the moment. E. P. de Booy suggests that after the age of 10 to 12 children stopped going to school.⁴¹ In addition, she presents a table on the number of pupils in a school in the province of Utrecht, which makes clear that the number of children older than 11 is limited.⁴² From a paper by Margaret Spufford, it becomes clear that children started going to school somewhere between the ages 4 and 7.⁴³ It is therefore believed that the school going age in Ceylon was between 5 and 11. It is unlikely that there was a 100 percent enrolment rate among the Ceylonese children, but it is assumed that those children not going to school are captured by the 'young men' and 'young women'. With an estimated total population of 799,519 in 1697 this puts the total (free) working population (men, widowers and young men) at a mere 228,019.

5. Occupational distribution of the population in Ceylon

Now, having ascertained the size of the working population, we can examine the occupational distribution of this population using the VOC surveys on the Company's subjects. These lists, next to giving information on gender and child ratios, also provide information on which caste these people belong to. Since the caste system in Ceylon was to a large extent occupational,⁴⁴ these lists provide an excellent source for examining labour relations. Before discussing these, it necessary to provide some background information on the economy and caste system in Ceylon.

Pre-modern Ceylon was, unsurprisingly, a predominantly agricultural society. The majority of the people were engaged in subsistence agriculture, in which paddy cultivation was the central feature. In addition, peasants were engaged in shifting agriculture: *chēna* cultivation. According to K. M. Da Silva, *chēna* cultivation was not a wasteful form of agriculture, as the Dutch regarded it, but was in fact 'an economically justifiable form of land usage' because of the abundance of forest lands and low population densities.⁴⁵ Ceylon was also a feudal society and the peasants were obliged to perform services to the Kandyan King or, in the Maritime Provinces, to the Company (the *rājakāriya* system). What these services encompassed depended on caste; hence the occupational caste system. The farmers' caste,

⁴⁰ Robert Knox, 'An Historical Relation of Ceylon', *Ceylon Historical Journal* 6 (1956-57) [first published in 1681]. Baldaeus, *Nauwkeurige Beschrijvinge*. Knox writes for example that it was one of the women's tasks to gather firewood in the woods, p. 136.

⁴¹ E. P. de Booy, *Kweekhoven der Wijsheid. Basis- en vervolgonderwijs in de steden van de provincie Utrecht van 1580 tot het begin der 19^e eeuw* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1980) 30.

⁴² E. P. de Booy, *De weldaet der scholen. Het plattelandsonderwijs in de provincie Utrecht van 1580 tot het begin der 19^{de} eeuw* (Utrecht, 1977) 75.

⁴³ Margaret Spufford, 'Literacy, trade and religion in the commercial centres of Europe', in: Karel Davids and Jan Lucassen (eds.) *A Miracle mirrored. The Dutch Republic in European Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1995) 229-283.

⁴⁴ Alicia Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780-1815. Expansion and Reform* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2007) 17; Roberts, *Caste Conflict*.

⁴⁵ De Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 149.

the *Goyigama* in the Sinhalese part and the *Vellale* in the Tamil areas, formed both the largest and the highest caste. Other castes, such as the fisher, washer, carpenter, barber, and silversmith castes, on the other hand, had to perform the specific duties attached to their caste (which might be the reason why the VOC collected this data). But, Alicia Schrikker notes, this does not necessarily imply that all members of the castes actually performed this labour, as most of these people were engaged in subsistence agriculture.

Subsistence agriculture and feudalism are not the whole story, however, especially since the traditional peasant settlements were not completely self-sufficient.⁴⁶ Some consumer commodities came from distant areas, while other essential articles and services made or provided by specialist castes were sometimes unavailable in a village, 'as the caste-based division of labour extended beyond one single village settlement.'⁴⁷ There is evidence that those parts of Dutch ruled south-west Ceylon that had a surplus of paddy traded with parts that did not produce enough.⁴⁸ The *Salagama* caste (or *chalias*), for example, who were above all occupied with cinnamon peeling, did not produce sufficient rice themselves and thus purchased it in Matara. Additionally, François Valentijn and James Cordiner both state that one of the tasks of the women was to go to the market, while Robert Knox wrote that there were shops in the cities, 'which sell cloth, rice, salt, tobacco, limes, drugs, fruits, swords, steel, brass, copper, &c.'⁴⁹

S. B. D. de Silva has demonstrated the existence of 'a variegated criss-cross of commercial relations mediated through monetary exchange',⁵⁰ in the Kandyan regions. As commercial activity was even more widespread in the Maritime Provinces, the circulation of money must have been even greater there. Gerrit Knaap, for example, has shown that as early as the 1690s 'hundreds of Sinhalese came into Colombo every day to sell rice, cattle and other food in the market',⁵¹ and Arasaratnam has suggested the common use of copper coins in the Dutch areas. During the eighteenth century, the VOC actively encouraged commercial agriculture producing cash crops like coffee, pepper, cardamom and cinnamon, which could be 'viably cultivated with paid labour'.⁵²

This brings the discussion to wage labour. The widespread existence of commercial activity and monetary exchange suggests that it is highly probable that there were also many people engaged in wage labour. The availability of wage labour in Kandy is recognized by De Silva, and this was no different for Dutch provinces. Baldaeus, mentioned that carpenters and masons in the Jaffna Commandment earned approximately five to six *stuivers* per day.⁵³ The Company itself also hired many labourers and the wages found in VOC documents correspond with the rate given by Baldaeus. Both Dewasiri and Arasaratnam suggest that the presence of the Company, and its demand for labour, also affected the supply and thus induced a change of labour relations. Dewasiri wrote that in the expanding urban areas, 'there was a growing tendency for caste-based occupations to be transformed into exclusive sources of livelihood'.⁵⁴ While Arasaratnam notes that 'fishing castes showed an inclination

⁴⁶ Dewasiri, *The Adaptable Peasant*, 49,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁸ D. A. Kotelawele, 'Agrarian policies of the Dutch in South-west Ceylon, 1743-1767', *A.A.G. Bijdragen* 14 (1966) 3-33, there 13.

⁴⁹ R Knox, 'An Historical Relation', 155.

⁵⁰ S. B. D. de Silva, *Political Economy of Underdevelopment* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982) 211.

⁵¹ Knaap, 'Europeans, mestizos', 85.

⁵² Arasaratnam, 'Social and economic change', 49.

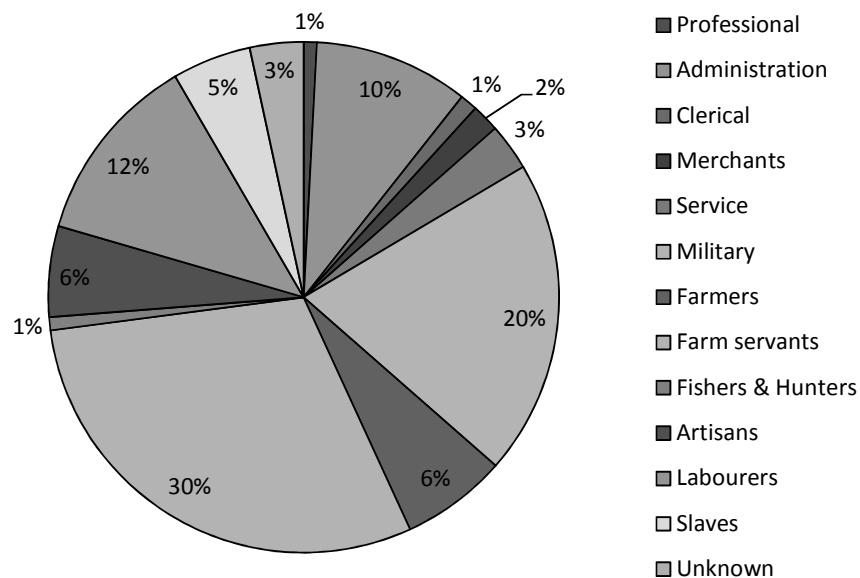
⁵³ Baldaeus, *Nauwkeurige Beschrijvinge*, 188.

⁵⁴ Dewasiri, *The adaptable peasant*, 62.

to labour in works connected with ports and the artisan castes stuck to the type of labour related to the calling of their caste.⁵⁵ The agricultural castes, on the other hand, showed no inclination to take advantage of the Company's labour demand (most likely because the agricultural castes were the highest in status, and a change of job thus meant a lowering of caste/status).

This suggests that the VOC surveys can provide interesting insights into the division of labour in Ceylon (even if many of the castes were simultaneously engaged in subsistence agriculture). In the VOC lists, many more occupations and castes appeared, to make some sense out of this, these have been brought into 13 groups (shown in table 3 and figures 9-11).⁵⁶ Figures 9 and 10 clearly capture the difference between Jaffna on the hand, and Colombo and Galle on the other, while figure 11 shows the combined data for the three geographical districts.

FIGURE 9: OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS IN COLOMBO AND GALLE, 1684.



The differences between the two figures are striking: Jaffna had considerably more farmers, 44 vs. 5 percent in Colombo and Galle, as well as slaves: 21 vs. 5 percent. On the other hand, Colombo and Galle had more labourers, soldiers and administrators. However, this difference seems to be artificial and a discrepancy in how people were classified by the Dutch administrators rather than a real difference in the division of labour between these areas. It is likely that in Colombo and Galle, the 'administrators' (village headmen etc.) and soldiers (*lascarins*) were also farmers, while many of labourers were perhaps also engaged in agricultural tasks. Regarding the difference in number of slaves, we are very much groping in the dark. In the literature there is no mentioning of such a difference, but on the contrary suggests that the number of slaves in Colombo was in fact quite significant.⁵⁷ Under-

⁵⁵ Arasaratnam, 'Social and economic change', 48.

⁵⁶ Sometimes the Dutch noted the caste name, e.g. 'Bellale', in which case the secondary literature was used in order to determine to which group this caste belonged. In other cases, the source state what kind of work these people were doing, e.g.: 'ride and take care of the elephants', or just their job e.g. carpenter, fisher, mason etc. See appendix.

⁵⁷ Raben, *Batavia and Colombo*, 104.

enumeration of slaves in the south-west in this particular source provides a possible answer. The total number of slaves in Ceylon thus might be somewhat higher than is suggested in the figures presented here.

FIGURE 10: OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS IN JAFFNA, 1684.

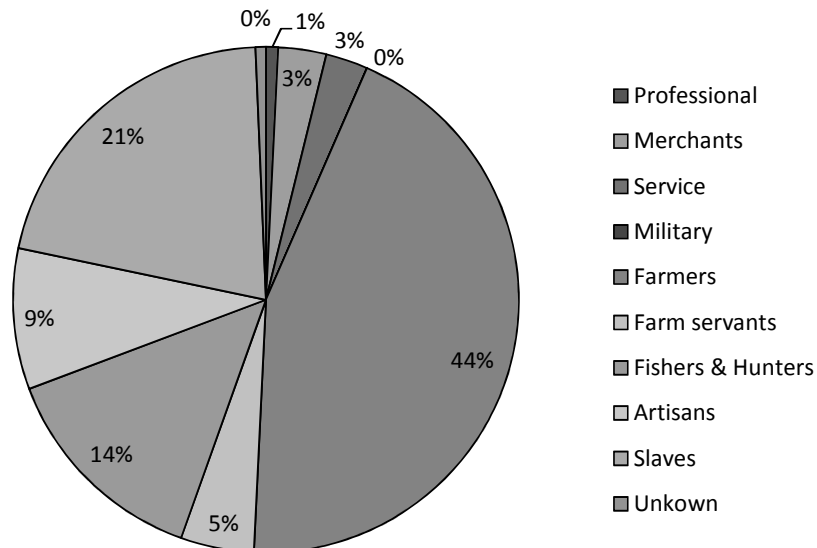
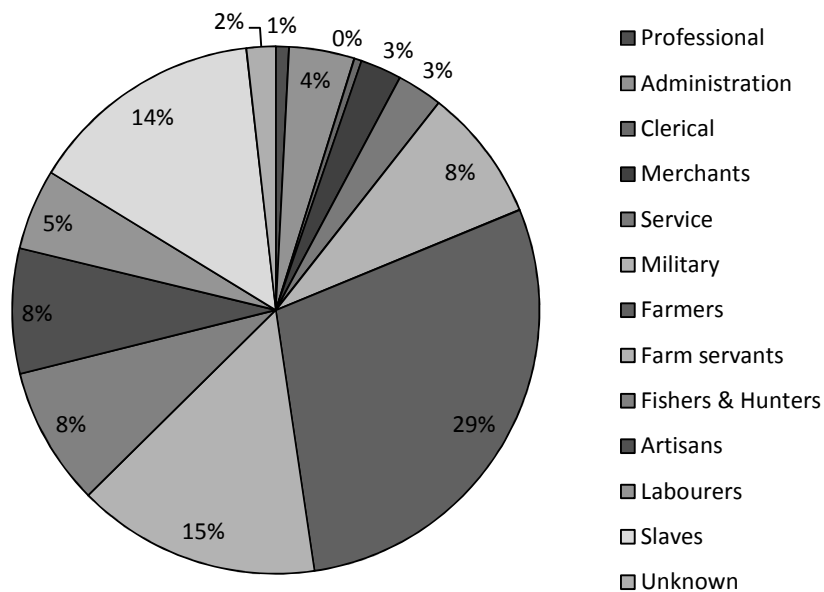


FIGURE 11: OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS IN THE 3 MARITIME PROVINCES OF CEYLON, 1684.



The accompanying database provides more details, as these major groups (created for graphic clarity) are subdivided in a larger number of minor groups. In this paper, a few of these groups are discussed. The group of 'farmers' shall be further ignored as it is the subject

of other studies.⁵⁸ Starting with the groups of labourers and farm servants, which consists of a number of people of relatively low status, such as *coolies*, *olias*, *bailadoors* and *naindes*, whom, according to the surveys, 'were used for various services.' The *coolies* and *naindes* were the most numerous of these. The latter has also been translated as 'husbandmen' and it is therefore likely that many of these were thus mostly engaged in agriculture, they are therefore part of the group 'agricultural workers'. The *coolies*, could also be found in other VOC sources (account books stating the expenses on personnel), as wage labourers performing unskilled labour in construction: the total number of coolies was 11,280.

The fisher castes (*Karāva*) comprising over 8 percent of the total population, constitute another interesting group, as these were not involved in peasant agriculture but were engaged in fishing or related activities on a full-time basis.⁵⁹ Next to fishers, such as the *carreas* and *moeckias*, this group also includes the *paravar*, pearl fishers (2,499 in total, of which 820 were adult men). Pearl fishing was a very profitable undertaking and in 1699 it brought in almost 96,000 guilders.⁶⁰ These fisheries were, however, not held annually and sometimes there were no pearl fisheries for decades.⁶¹ It is likely that these pearl fishers were engaged in 'normal' fishing or other related activities when there were no pearl fisheries. Another profitable activity was the elephant hunt, which occupied a similar amount of people (3126, of which 889 were adult men; the rest of the people included in this group in the above figures were regular hunters). According to the *Generale Missiven* of the VOC 66 elephants were sold for 20,755 rix-dollars (49,812 guilders)⁶² in 1684, and this number increased to 46,015 rix-dollars for 147 elephants in 1688. According to Governor De Heere (1697-1702) 444 men were necessary to feed and take care of 163 elephants in 1698 (2.7 men per elephant).⁶³ Thus, in 1684 there were 178 men busy taking care of the elephants (2.7 x 66), while the other 711 men (889 – 178) were engaged in the capture of elephants.

Other commercially attractive people (for the VOC that is) were those engaged in primary produce for the market (headed under 'agricultural workers'). Most important among these were the *chalias*, the cinnamon peelers. The amount of cinnamon that a *chalia* had to deliver was dependent on age. At the age of twelve, the *chalia* boy was obliged to peel cinnamon, and went on doing so till he was disabled by old age. An able bodied *chalia* had to give 12 'roben' of around 62 pounds to the VOC free of any charge. Besides this, he had to peel another 'bhar' of about 600 pounds for which he was paid to nominal sum of 6 larines (72 stuivers).⁶⁴ During the late seventeenth century, some 500,000 pounds of cinnamon were peeled for both the Indian trade and the European export. Thus, since the maximum amount of cinnamon peeled by one *chalia* was 1344 pounds, this suggests that there were around 372 cinnamon peelers. In the VOC surveys, only 256 adult men were counted, but these could be helped by 221 *chalia* boys (which seems plausible considering

⁵⁸ Dewasiri, *The Adaptable Peasant*, provides an excellent examination of the agricultural sector. In addition, Jan Kok and Albert van den Belt are currently examining the *tombos*, a register of land and families, including details on area, produce, ownership and income, much more suitable for the study of the system of (family) farming in Ceylon.

⁵⁹ Dewasiri, *The Adaptable Peasant*, 62.

⁶⁰ Van Dam, *Beschrijvinge*, Part 2.2, p. 282.

⁶¹ Pieris, *Ceylon and the Hollanders*, 82-83.

⁶² One rix-dollar was worth 2.40 guilders; Albert van den Belt, *Het VOC-bedrijf op Ceylon. Een voorname vestiging van de Oost Indische Compagnie in de 18^{de} eeuw* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2008).

⁶³ G. J. Engelsman, 'De olifantenhandel van de VOC op Ceylon. De invloed van de bevelhebbers op de verkoop en de prijzen in de periode 1658-1710' (unpublished MA-thesis, University of Leiden, 1996) 29.

⁶⁴ Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power*, 185.

the discussion above). The total number of peelers had increased to 2,924 during the middle of the eighteenth century.⁶⁵ Next to the cinnamon peelers, this group includes toddy tappers, woodcutters and arrack producers. During the eighteenth century these people could be employed as wage labourers in the market-oriented plantation agriculture.⁶⁶

In this paragraph the artisans, service workers (washers and barbers) and merchants are discussed. The occupations of the first two groups were transformed into exclusive sources of livelihood in the expanding urban areas in the Maritime Provinces.⁶⁷ The artisans (including carpenters, smiths, masons etc.), comprising almost 8 percent of the total population, were an important pool of skilled labour (instrumental in the division of labour), while the washers and barbers provided low-status, yet, instrumental services. The merchants (2.4 percent of the total population), *chetties* of South India origin, and *moors*, Muslims from India, signify the (widespread) existence of commercial activity.

The groups discussed in these paragraphs combined (fishers and elephant hunters, agricultural workers, artisans, washers, merchants, labourers, as well as the clergymen) encompass almost 40 percent of the entire population. These groups were less dependent on subsistence agriculture, and were increasingly drawn into a system of wage labour during the eighteenth century. According to Dewasiri, the high demand of labour during the time of the VOC, 'disturbed the pre-colonial equilibrium of labour distribution between *rājakāriya* [i.e. the system of feudal services] and the basic production activity of the peasant.' Under pressure of this demand, the *rājakāriya* system was transformed into a sort of quasi wage-labour system, 'although because of its compulsory nature, it was still not a capitalist free wage-labour system.'⁶⁸

6. Conclusion

Relying heavily on hitherto unexploited quantitative material from the VOC archives in The Hague, this paper has attempted an assessment of labour relations in Ceylon during the late seventeenth century. New estimates show that the total population of the island comprised of around 782,000 people, of whom 216,000 were Christians. Since the population growth in the Dutch Maritime Provinces was offset by the decline in Kandy, total population growth was more or less stagnant during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In addition, it was shown that there were about 28 percent men, 29 percent women, 25 percent boys and 18 percent girls (figure 6). With only the men working, the total (free) working population was about 220,000. Most of these were engaged in subsistence agriculture. Yet, perhaps around 40 percent of the population in the Maritime Provinces was less dependent on subsistence agriculture and, pushed by the VOC labour demand, were driven into semi-wage-labour system

The numbers given in this paper and accompanying database are by no means final. In contrast, they are based on estimates and assumptions. New research can verify or falsify the numbers and assumptions offered in this paper. Also, more research that could clarify what part of the specialist castes were engaged in commercial activity and/or were earning wages is also more than welcome. Regarding the agricultural sector, new research on the system of (family) farming in Ceylon is conducted at the moment through an examination of

⁶⁵ S. Arasaratnam (ed.), *Memoir of Julius Stein van Gollennesse, governor of Ceylon, 1743-1751, for his successor Gerrit Joan Vreeland, 28th February, 1751* (Colombo: Dept. of National Archives, 1974) 23.

⁶⁶ Dewasiri, *The Adaptable Peasant*, 62.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

the *tombos*, registers of land and families that include details on farm area, produce, ownership and income. Comparing the results of this paper with results from other parts of the world, should make clear the differences in labour systems across the globe.

Appendix I: HISCO major and minor occupational groups

The access-database provides the HISCO brand and occupations. In this appendix it is noted which workers (as found in the sources) are included in these groups:

- 0/1: Professional, technical and related workers: jurists, accountants (*borrewijs*), priests, teachers and *merinjos* (assistant teachers).
- 2: Administrative and managerial workers: *adigars*, *appuhamy*, *atta corle*, *mudaliyar*, *raalens*, *vidanes*, *reformadosse*, (all of these were headmen on various positions, high and low).
- 3: Clerical and related workers: *cannecappuls* (bookkeepers), writers and messengers.
- 4: Sales workers: *chetties* (trading-caste, from South Indian origin) and *moors* (Muslim traders from India).
- 5: Service workers: *tarumbas*, *hunnewas*, *maiynatos* (all of these are washers) and *pedias* (overseers of washers), barbers.
Military service: *mudaliyars* (officers), *arachies* and *canganes* (corporals), *lascarins* (soldiers), *tablinjeros* and *berrewaijs* (drummers) and horn blowers.
- 6: Agricultural, animal husbandry and forestry workers, fishermen and hunters:
Farmers: *vellala*, *paradesi* (literally strangers), *maddapalli*, and *agamudaiyan*, (these were Tamil cultivators' castes)⁶⁹ and cattle farmers.
Agricultural workers: *naindes*, *chalias* (cinnamon peelers), *durava* (headmen of cinnamon peelers) *chiandos* (toddy-tappers), wood cutters.
Fishers and hunters: *careas*, *moeckias*, and *timmulaes* (fishers), *baddas* and *pattangatty* (overseers of the fishers), *barimbis* (sailors), and *paravar* (pearlfishers); hunters, *badamas*, *marrigares*, *tammekares* and *pannikias* (elephant hunters) and *cornacx* (elephant riders).
- 7/8/9: Production and related workers, transport equipment operators and labourers
Various artisans: butchers, carpenters, coppersmiths, masons, painters, potters, shoemakers, silversmiths, smiths, leather workers, lime burners, salt and arrack makers, and weavers.
Labourers: *coolies*, *olias*, *bailedoors* (sources note these 'were used for various services').
Slaves: in Galle and Colombo, these were written down simply as 'slaves' (and interestingly, had no children), while in Jaffna there were four types of slaves: *nalluas* (slaves), *pallas* ('buijten slaven'/'outside slaves'), *corias* (house slaves) and *heijdense slaven* (non-Christian slaves).
- Unknown: for Jaffna this includes: cripples, beggars, and *toepasses* (Portuguese speaking peoples). For Colombo this includes: Mallabars, Bengals, Chinese, *toepasses*, and widows. For Galle this includes babies, widows, free Mallabars, pilgrims and those written down as 'brothers and friends' of other population groups. This is thus still a problematic group, as it includes both productive and unproductive peoples.

⁶⁹ Van Goor, *Jan Kompenie*, 162-3.

Appendix II: The access-database

The above information was used to create the access-database 'Ceylon Labour Relations, 1650'. This appendix provides extra information on the set-up of this database.

Entries 1-9 are estimates of the entire population of Ceylon, as well its separate provinces, as discussed in section 3 of this paper.

Entries 12-43 provide numbers on the composition – gender and age distribution – of the population in Ceylon, as discussed in section 4 of this paper. It was assumed that school children are aged between 5 and 11, and those too young to go to school (or to work, for that matter) between 0 and 5.

Entries 44-144 form the core of this database, as it provides labour relations for the adult men in the database. These data are only available for the Maritime Provinces, Kandy is therefore excluded. Professionals (jurists, teachers, priests etc.) have been assigned lab.rel. 18, while administrative workers/government officials have been assigned lab.rel. 12 in addition to 18; they were found on the VOC wage lists, and it is assumed that they owned (relatively large) farms, since they belonged to the upper-strata of Ceylonese society. All specialist castes, whether service, agricultural, or production related have been assigned lab.rel. 18., since the majority of these performed their services for the VOC (for which they also received wages – as becomes evident from a VOC wage lists from 1678-1679).⁷⁰ Labour relation 4 is given as secondary labour relation, because these people were simultaneously involved in subsistence agriculture, but since it is unknown how much time they devoted on each of these tasks, this is assumed to be 50-50. It is possible that a number of these people were working as independent craftsmen (lab.rel. 12) yet, it is uncertain how many, and for how much time. Future research should be devoted to this issue. Farmers and merchants have been assigned lab.rel. 12. Labourers and agricultural labourers have been assigned lab.rel. 18 and slaves have been assigned lab.rel. 17, because they were producing for the market. Finally soldiers and cinnamon peelers have been given lab.rel. 18, because they performed (obligatory) services for the VOC, but also received monetary compensation.

Entries 145-156 provides numbers for the women and children, as well as the group of men for which the occupation was unknown. The women have been assigned labour relation 5, while the children have been given labour relation 1, since they were going to school or were too young. It seems plausible, that a part of this group also contributed to the household (labour relation 5) for a part of the time.

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These documents contain demographic (and occupational) data on the years 1684, 1692, 1694, 1697 and 1699.

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