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The challenges of writing the history of localities that were under colonial rule in the early phase of European expansion: An investigation into writing the history of Negombo (Sri Lanka) in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries¹

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ABSTRACT

Local history has been conventionally defined as a chronicle of a limited geographical area. The study of local history can have positive outcomes including reconstructing our ancestor's everyday lives and providing opportunities for students to develop investigative research skills, develop linkages with locals and to also motivate students to improve their basic skills of reading, writing and critical thinking. Unlike in the West, however, where local historians use old records of their locality, local historians of lands colonized by Westerners have problems finding source material. For example, in Sri Lanka, the Portuguese occupying the southwest lowlands destroyed Buddhist and Hindu temples which often contained local records. They tried to replace the temples with Roman Catholic churches, but these records also seem to have been lost when they were also mostly abandoned or destroyed under Calvinist Dutch rule. This article, based on an examination of Portuguese archival material relating to an area on the western coast of Sri Lanka during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, argues that, despite the gaps created by the loss of local records, data from colonial archival sources when used with a critical eye, can be used to give us some insights on economic practices within localities that were colonized. They also provide at least a glimpse of both the changes and the continuities in the life of the people, as well as the economic burdens imposed on them by the state during colonial rule and the social changes that resulted from colonial policies.


KEYWORDS:

Local history, Negombo, Kotte, Sri Lanka, Portuguese, Religion, Caste, State Revenue

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The nature and the benefits of local history

Local history has been conventionally defined as a chronicle of a limited geographical area within a country, often done by amateur local historians. Up to the mid or late nineteenth century, professional historians tended to look upon local histories with some disdain, largely because they were seen as uncritical descriptions. As Pierre Goubert (1971) remarks, local history was about “legislative or administrative acts, the founding charters [of cities], feudal documents, and other evidences concerning the great noble families, the pious priests, and abbots who had been influential” (p.114). Nevertheless, as Goubert points out, local historical investigations, such as those of eighteenth century demographer Messance, were occasionally very illuminating. For example, they “proved with a strictly regional analysis of numerous parishes in the Lyonnais, Auvergne, and Upper Normandy that the French population had risen markedly between the end of the seventeenth century and the end of the eighteenth century” contradicting the opinions of better-known writers such as Montesquieu and Voltaire (Goubert 1971, pp.115-116). Western professional historians in the last century have become more respectful of insights produced through local history although they continue to urge local (often amateur) historians to ensure that

[local history is] a study based on a wide variety of documentary evidence and placed in a comparative context that should be both regional and national. Such study ought to be accomplished by a historian using methods appropriate to the topic under consideration while following general rules of historical inquiry: open-mindedness, honesty, accountability, and accuracy. (Pasternak, 2009, as cited in Kammen, 2003, p. 4)²

Today, local history encompasses a wide variety of writings. As Pasternak (2009) explains

Local history narratives are created by a wide range of people for a myriad purposes. Some are written by academics for other academics or for the public at large, while others are written by amateurs for their local communities. Some are written with the purpose to engage local audiences, what one might call public local history, while others are written to test a historical theory in language that is largely inaccessible to the general public. Together, the collected writings provide multiple perspectives on a place that a historian can consider with a nuanced view. (p. 15)

² For a good account of the history of writing local history in the USA, see Pasternak (2009, pp.28-58).

The study of local history can have several positive outcomes. As Joseph A. Amato (2002) points out,

Local history carries with it the potential to reconstruct our ancestor's everyday lives: The goods, the machines, the tools with which they worked, the groups in which they were raised, in which they matured, celebrated, had ambitions, retired and resigned themselves to their fates. It recaptures how they experienced the world through their senses, what they thought, how they felt, what they got angry, fought and cursed about; what they prayed for; what drove them insane; and finally, how they died and were buried. (p.3)

A study of local history can also be a tool that provides opportunities for students in both secondary schools and universities to develop investigative research skills, develop linkages with locals and to also motivate students to improve their basic skills of reading, writing and critical thinking (Aktekin, 2010; Haydn et al, 2001). No wonder local history attracts attention and interest. In many Western countries, local and regional history is also seen as providing a base of information for historians working on broader topics (Amato, 2002, pp.12-16).

The study of local history in colonized lands

Unlike in the West where local historians use old records, often collecting and preserving primary documents of their locality, local historians of lands colonized by Westerners have a major problem relating to source material. For example, in Sri Lanka, the Portuguese occupying the southwest lowlands in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, destroyed Buddhist and Hindu temples which often contained local records. They tried to replace the temples with Roman Catholic churches, at least some of which must have maintained records of births, baptisms and deaths. Unfortunately, whatever records existed in those churches also seem to have been lost when the Dutch Calvinists who conquered the area in the mid-seventeenth century expelled the Catholic priests, after which the churches themselves were mostly abandoned or destroyed. A few local records have survived in the regions of Sri Lanka that did not come under colonial rule until the nineteenth century, but they were often chronicles of the history of various kingdoms or information relating to boundary divisions of local districts as seen in the *vitti poth* and the *kadaim poth* (Abeyawardana, 1978; C. R. de Silva, 1983; Dhammananda, 1969; Somaratne, 1975; Suraweera, 1996). There have been efforts to use these on such documentation and on family records, but they have been few and far between (Pilapitiya, 2018; Tennekoon, 2023; Tilakaratne, 2023; Vitarana, 1986) and even when writing the regional and local history of areas that were free of colonial rule till the nineteenth century, later historians have often had to rely on colonial sources to substantiate their accounts (see Somasunderam, 2013, esp. pp. 135-172). It is also true that the situation improves for coastal Sri Lanka in the late seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries due to the preservation of some Dutch local records in local archives (Lyna & Bulten, 2023, esp. pp. 455-461; De Leede and Rupesinghe, 2023) and although these records are often incomplete, they have been, on occasion, successfully used to write the histories of localities (see Wagenaar, 1994).

Nevertheless, our knowledge of the history of localities in coastal Sri Lanka in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, however, often has to depend on references in what records the colonial state deemed necessary to preserve at the centers of their power. That is part of the legacy of colonialism. As a result, unlike in the West, where (despite the occasional loss of some local records due to armed conflict and natural disasters) the local feeds the national, in exploring the local history of colonized areas like Negombo, historians are forced to rely primarily, if not wholly, on records generated by colonial rulers and often archived in Europe.

In areas that have not been subsumed by colonization, local history is sometimes able to draw from regional traditions. A region, as distinct from a locality is often defined as a much larger entity sharing common geographic, cultural, economic, and political traditions. Local historians of the West often use the region as a backdrop for the history of the locality and utilize data from neighboring localities within the region to enrich the local story (for example Lavelle et al, 2021). Given the loss of data on colonial rule in early modern Sri Lanka, the cross-fertilization of local accounts with regional history and tradition is also limited, despite some creative efforts in recent times (for example P. de Silva, 2014; McGilvray, 2008; Walters, 1996).

Negombo in the sixteenth century

The locality of Negombo, known as Meegamuva in Sinhala and Nircolombo in Tamil (Pieris, 1949, p. 25) is situated 24 miles north of Colombo on the western coast of Sri Lanka. It was known in the sixteenth century as a prosperous port. Its disadvantage in not having a river to link it to inland areas was counteracted by a lagoon in its proximity which enabled goods unloaded at the mouth of the lagoon to be transported by boat southwards to regions close to the capital city of Kotte. The lagoon, mistermmed '*rio*' or river by the Portuguese, had traditionally been used to shelter small vessels and convey goods across short distances. It had its limitations. As the seventeenth century Portuguese chronicler António Bocarro (1937-1938) explains,

Negombo is five leagues to the north of Colombo and is situated on the banks of a wide salt river [*rio*] which flows inland. . . The river above mentioned, although it has a width of a stone's throw at the mouth, is not deep because it is blocked by a sandbank, in the middle of which there is a canal with twelve or fifteen spans of water, and through this canal only rowing vessels

can move out. *Pataxos* and *pagueis*³ have to unload their cargoes to be able to go in and out. Upstream the river is wider and in some parts deeper than in others. (p.10)

Nevertheless, Jorge Florim de Almeida asserted that in the mid-sixteenth century, out of the ports of the Kingdom of Kotte, Negombo had provided the highest revenue to the ruler. In de Almeida's words, "It is said to have yielded sixty thousand *fanams* at seven *fanams* a *larin*⁴ in the time of Cota from arecanut which came by river from inland and from coconut trees and *chaleas* and all the fines and rents... (C. R. de Silva, 1975, p.116). In contrast, according to de Almeida, "in time of past kings," the annual royal revenues of Colombo (including Mutwal) amounted to 40,000 *fanams* and those of Galle in the times of the kings of Kotte were also 40,000 *fanams* "in customs together with the revenue of the *shahbandar*" (C. R. de Silva, 1975, p.113). The annual royal revenues of Panadura "in the time of the kings of Cota and Raju" were only 20,000 *fanams*, and those of Kalutara and Maggona "in the time of the kings of Cota and the same in the time of Raju" were 25,000 *fanams* (C. R. de Silva, 1975, p, 116) De Almeida also claimed that "... in the times of Raju, it was this port [Negombo] that yielded most revenue and yielded three times more than now" (C. R. de Silva, 1975, p. 116) which suggests that in the sixteenth century, Negombo was, if not the premier port, one of the busiest ports of Sri Lanka. Indeed, the desire to attract some of Negombo's trade to the capital city of Kotte might well be the reason why King Vira Parakramabahu VIII (1477-1489) "ordered to be dug by main strength a broad and deep canal of six leagues navigable by boat, from Cota to Nigumbo. . ." (Queyroz, 1930, p. 25). Unfortunately, the canal which led from Negombo lagoon to the capital city was overwhelmed by salt water during high tide and the resultant flooding ruined rice fields in the neighborhood precipitating a popular revolt which ended with the abandonment of the canal (Queyroz, 1930, pp. 25-26).⁵

There is little evidence of political events in Negombo for most of the sixteenth century. It seems likely that in the early part of this century, Negombo was ruled by Taniyavallabahu, brother of King Vira Parakramabahu VIII of Kotte. Taniyavallabahu exercised power under the suzerainty of the rule of Kotte from nearby Madampe.⁶

³ These were sea-going vessels.

⁴ The *fanam* was a local coin which fell in relation to the *larin* and the *xerafin* in the late sixteenth century. In the 1570s and 1580s, a *larin* was the equivalent of seven *fanams*. By 1599, a *larin* was worth 15 to 20 *fanams*. Three *larins* were equal in value to one *xerafin* or *pardão*. The term *chaleas* indicated cinnamon peelers.

⁵ For a discussion of evidence relating to this canal, see Somaratne (1975, pp. 159-160). However, Queyroz notes that the lagoon itself provided a convenient way to transport goods southwards from Negombo. See Queyroz (1930, pp. 46-47).

⁶ For more information on Taniyavallabahu see Somaratne (1975, pp. 162-163, 169) and C. R. de Silva (1970, pp. 27-28).

Negombo port came into the picture during a succession crisis in 1521. Vijayabahu VI, King of Kotte (1513-1521) and his brother Rajasinha had had four sons (one of whom died young) from a polyandrous marriage with a common queen. When the queen died, Vijayabahu married again and adopted a child called Devarajasingha from the new queen's family. The crisis arose when Ekanayaka Mudali, the chief minister of Kotte and another prominent noble, together with the new queen plotted to kill the three surviving princes (Bhuvanekabahu, Pararajasingha and Mayadunne) and to replace them as heir by the new queen's adopted child, Devarajasingha. It is likely that the chief minister's aim was to become regent on the death of the king but the king himself, under the influence of the new queen, seems to have been receptive to the plan to change the succession. In 1521, the three princes, with the aid of some Buddhist priests, fled Kotte and began a revolt against Vijayabahu VI. While the youngest prince, Mayadunne went to the interior lands seeking help from the people of those areas (mostly the Four Korales) and the king of Kandy, the two elder brothers came to Negombo to muster support from the region around (the Pitigal and Alutkuru Korales). There is no indication that Taniyavallabahu took sides in this conflict but he is likely to have supported the princes or remained neutral. Historian Somaratne (1975) implies that this might have been why Taniyavallabahu retained control of his sub-kingdom after the revolt of the princes was successful (also see C. R. de Silva, 1995b, pp, 23-24). We know that Taniyavallabahu's grandson Vidiye Bandara also held power in this area for a while.

There are further gaps in the evidence of the political history of Negombo during the mid-sixteenth century. As mentioned earlier, Vidiye Bandara's family held authority in the Seven Korales (which included Negombo) until the early 1550s. Meanwhile, the Portuguese who had set up a fort in Colombo in 1518 and provided support to Bhuvanekabahu, King of Kotte (1521-1551) in his disputes against his brother Mayadunne, King of Sitawaka (1521-1581), seem to have gradually become a force in Sri Lankan politics. However, Vidiye Bandara's arrest by the Portuguese in 1552 and the rebellion and anti-Christian crusade he led after he escaped in 1553, led to a major change in the balance of power. To defeat Vidiye Bandara, the Portuguese had been forced to make an alliance with Sitawaka in 1555. After Vidiye Bandara was defeated by forces of this new alliance, Dharmapala, who the Portuguese set up as the new ruler of Kotte (1551-1597) converted to Christianity (Strathern, 2007). A church had been set up in Negombo as well as in five other coastal cities in the period between the arrival of the Franciscan missionaries in 1544 and the year 1551 (Quere, 1995, p.16). However, these churches, except for that constructed at Colombo, probably did not last long, for by the 1560s most of the kingdom of Kotte fell into the hands of Sitawaka forces. Thereafter, Negombo became a major port for Sitawaka. Queyroz (1930) reports that in 1575 the Portuguese learned that in Negombo, "there were many vessels laden for sailing. . .," and attacked it sending

a force across land (p.425). Indeed, Negombo came under Portuguese attack five times between 1574 and 1578 (C. R. de Silva, 1995c, pp. 85-91; Pieris, 1949, p. 25). Two Buddhist temples, three leagues inland from Negombo are said to have been destroyed in these attacks (Queyroz, 1930, p. 425).

Later Portuguese records indicate that Negombo's trade in the second half of the sixteenth century was well regulated. Goods brought into the port area from inland paid *sungam* (octroi) dues according to method of transport - elephant, bull or man. *Sungam* was collected at four points that provided entry to the Negombo area - Dunugaha, (Doonagaha, 9 miles northeast of Negombo town), Dagonna (5 miles east of Negombo town), Andi Ambalama (5 miles southeast of Negombo town, near the north end of the modern airport) and Katana (5 miles northeast of Negombo, near the present day Free Trade Zone). As local officials certified at a gathering in Colombo on August 20, 1613, payment was on goods such as arecanut, rice, and other grains and legumes (Codrington, 1938, p. 50; Pieris, 1949, pp. 26-27). The Portuguese *tombo* of 1614 records that the dues at these *junçoës* were 700 nuts for a bull-load of arecanut, 1400 nuts for an elephant-load and 100 for a man-load. The payment for a bull-load of paddy or *kurakkan* was one and a half silver *fanams*; for a bull-load of rice it was three silver *fanams*, and for an elephant-load the dues were double that of a bull-load. For a man-load of rice the dues made up half a measure of rice, and for a man-load of paddy or *kurakkan*, it was one measure.⁷

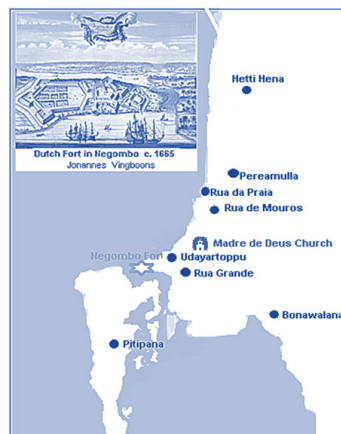


Figure 1: Negombo in the Seventeenth Century

⁷ Octroi duties, which were taxes levied by a local political unit on certain categories of goods as they entered the area at specified dues collection places (*juncoes*), seem to have varied in amount according to area. For octroi duties on goods entering the Chilaw area at this time as recorded in the *tombo* of 1614 see Abeyasinghe (1966, pp.168-169). The data on Negombo is also from Volume 2 of the *tombo* of 1614 compiled by Antão Vaz Freire, Portuguese Superintendent of Revenue Revenue or *vedor* of Ceylon. Volumes 2 and 3 of the *tombo* can be found in the Arquivo Historico Ultramarino (AHU), Lisbon, Codice 484 (594 folios) and Codice 222 (174 folios). Volumes 1 and 4 are lost (see Fitzler, 1927).

Portuguese sources indicate that goods exported from Negombo by sea paid customs dues, which were much higher than the octroi duties. For instance, the export dues on an *amuna* of arecanut (24,000 nuts) was one and a half *larin* (In the mid-sixteenth century a *larin* was the equivalent of six or seven *fanams*. (C. R. de Silva, 1975, p. 115). Other goods that were exported are likely to have included coconut oil, masts, oars and coir rope (Flores, 1998, pp. 52-63). Incoming vessels from Southeast and East Asia as well as the Middle East seem have paid a six per cent tax on goods they brought in such as rice, salt, salted fish, opium and cloth (C. R. de Silva, 1975, p. 115; Pieris, 1949, pp. 25-26)⁸ for that amount was what they paid in later times, but those from the Fishery Coast of South India are likely to have paid five per cent. But there were other sources of revenue that the ruler collected from Negombo. These included the tax on coconut trees or the *pol aya* which was a silver *fanam* for ten trees. By the end of the sixteenth century, the 30,000 coconut trees in the area yielded 150 *larins* to the ruler (Pieris, 1949, pp. 29-30).⁹ Then again, there was revenue from fishing. There were about 25 *padas* (small row boats) for in-shore fishing. Of these, 23 paid 5 *larins* each in May and two assigned to caste chiefs or *patamgatims* were free of dues. There were 30 small fishing nets used in the lagoon of Negombo, of which two were free for the *patamgatims* and the other 28 paid one *larim* each. In addition, there were 40 nets *de Camarois*, of which two were free for the *patamgatims* and the other 38 paid half a *larin* or 10 *fanams* each every October.

The 1614 *tombo* also records that in the time of King Rajasinha I, the people of the area were obliged to supply 10 *mutti* (pots) of salt fish a month worth four *xerafins* a year to the King's Treasury (*Gabadava*) and that a dozen or so *karava* (*careia*) caste people were obliged to bring fresh fish for the king's kitchen (and were themselves supplied with food when so occupied) (Pieris, 1949, p. 27). Craftsmen (people of the *kottalbadda*) including goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, and various craftsmen served Rajasinha when their services were needed, and if they served continuously for more than three days, they were given food rations (a grant called *bichão*) (Pieris, 1949, p. 28). Washermen also had their service obligations. Members of the *chanda* (or *hakuru*) caste paid dues in jaggery.¹⁰ Households that made arrack (*vinho orracão*) paid 10 *fanams*, but sometimes only 5 *fanams*, but there seems to have been an additional tax of a *fanam* a day for every ten coconut

⁸ Pieris (1949, pp. 25-26) points out that the *tombo* of 1614 notes that the customs dues on the foodstuffs and salt recorded in it were the same as those in the time of Rajasinha I of Sitawaka (1581-1592). While there are no specific references in the sources on trade between Negombo and the Maldives, it is likely that the port participated in the import of Maldivian fish and salted fish from the Maldives.

⁹ The *tombo* of 1614 also records a garden in Dalur (Dalupota) in which seven coconut palms had been reserved to make oil for the pagoda.

¹⁰ A form of sugar made from coconut. Jaggery was also made from the *kitul* palm but there is no evidence of *kitul* jaggery production in Negombo.

trees when they were tapped for *sura* (toddy) (Pieris, 1949, pp. 32-33). However, most paddy lands seem to have been exempt from taxes, although the *tombo* of 1614 notes an occasional field which had the obligation to pay one seventh or one eighth of the crop. For example, this *tombo* records a holding of 3 *pālas* at Chunapetime (possibly Hunupitiya, location not identified) held by Cuta Peruma *gentio* with an obligation of paying 1:8 and its records for Oriattopo (Udayartoppu) indicate that Dom Fernando held a field of one *amuna* with no obligations to pay dues and another field of one *pāla* and 3 *curunis* with 1:7 obligation. A *pāla of paddy* was made up about 2 roods or half an acre and four *pālas* made up one *amuna*.

Portuguese dominance over Negombo

The fall of the kingdom of Sitawaka and the conquest of the Negombo area by the Portuguese after 1592 introduced some significant changes. In 1593 a force under Kuruppu Mudaliyar occupied Negombo and built a fortification with earth and coconut planks. It was designed to control Negombo harbor and was guarded by local troops supported by a Portuguese garrison of 25 to 30 men. According to Portuguese historian Fernão de Queyroz, Lourenço Teixeira de Macedo was made captain of the fort. A church was set up and many locals were converted to Roman Catholic Christianity (Queyroz, 1930, pp. 472, 589). It is reported that Pero Lopez de Souza when appointed ‘*Conquistador*’ of Ceylon, left his fleet in Negombo on his way from Goa and proceeded to Colombo in May 1594, possibly because Negombo was seen as a secure port (Perera, 2022). However, this fort was unable to resist attack in 1603 during the revolt of Kangara Aratchi (Abeyasinghe, 1966, pp. 49-50; Pieris, 1949, pp. 25-26; Queyroz, 1930, pp. 588-589). Some of the Christians escaped to Colombo by boat but many Christians and some Portuguese, including Franciscan Friar Bernadino, lost their lives.¹¹ Portuguese dominance in Negombo was ensured (at least for a while) only after Lourenço Teixeira de Macedo built a new fort at Negombo on orders from the Captain General of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Dom Jeronimo de Azevedo. The fort which de Macedo built was small. It was triangular in shape with three well-built bulwarks – Nossa Senhora da Victoria, Espirito Santo and S. Lourenço and had a few pieces of artillery. (The illustrations of the fort printed in the pages below are from the collections of maps and plans of Ceylon drawn by Constantino de Sa de Miranda).¹²

¹¹ Queyroz (1930, p.589), Quéré (1995, p.108), Perera (2022).

¹² Published in Flores (2001). The illustrations of Negombo are on pages 67, 111, and 112 of this text.



Figure 2: Sketch drawn by Constantino de Sa de Miranda in 1624, Biblioteca Nacional de Madrid. Ms. 8930, f. 189

According to António Bocarro's (1937-1938) description of the fort, written in the 1630s

The walls of the fort are of stone and mortar, two and a half fathoms in height and six spans in thickness with their parapets. The length of each stretch of wall is ten fathoms. The bastions are slightly higher than the wall and are spike shaped.(p. 10)¹³

The captain was given a defensive force of *lascarins* (local militia) and 10-20 Portuguese soldiers plus five Portuguese officials and half a dozen *casados* who lived near the fort (C. R. de Silva, 1972, p. 75).¹⁴ According to Bocarro (1937-1938), "The artillery there consists of four pieces of breech-loading six pounders, and five firing swivel guns of the falcon type, all with their carriages with sufficient ammunition for any eventuality" (p. 10). De Macedo was made captain for life, given rights over the port for three lives and given a salary of 200 *xerafims* a year.¹⁵ The *tombo* of 1614 records that de Macedo possessed two gardens located between the lagoon and the sea near the fort, as well as an area called *motappali* on Rua da Cruz, and that the rent for 27 gardens at Rua de Mouros was given to the son of Lourenço Teixeira de Macedo, by order of Captain General de Azevedo.

¹³ Bocarro asserts that the fort was left incomplete because Lourenço Teixeira, who built the fort at his own expense, feared that if it were completed, it would be taken away from him.

¹⁴ De Almeida records only 10 soldiers in the revenue register of 1599 (see C. R. de Silva, 1975, p. 116). Bocarro (1937-1938) asserts that funds are set aside for 24 soldiers (p.10). A *casado* is a married Portuguese settler.

¹⁵ C. R. de Silva (1975, p. 115). By the 1630s the salary of the captain of Negombo had risen to 440 *xerafims* a year while the captains of Chilaw and Puttalam had only 200 *xerafims* each (C. R. de Silva, 1972, p. 230).

Payments of traditional dues continued. Twice a year in April and November, the community of Rua Grande (Maha Weediya or Main Street) with their *patamgatims*, waited on the King and offered him ten *cachas*¹⁶ and ten *pingos* of *caravado* as vassalage.¹⁷ These payments were the old Sinhalese *tuppoti panam* and *kat rajakariya* and were worth 21 *xerafins* and two *larins*. The community of Rua da Praia (Sea Street) did the same. The *chettis*, Muslims and *paravars* offered 20 *cachas* and the Pitivancarê (Pitipan Karai or Pitipana) group (including a milkman and a *chanda*) with their *patamgatim*, three *cachas* and ten *pingos* fish. Four washermen paid two *cachas* and dues in currency. The *tombo* of 1614 shows that their chief paid one *larin* and the others half a *larin* each. The *tombo* of 1614 also indicates that craftsmen of the *kottalbadda* including goldsmiths and blacksmiths paid one and a half *calanges* of gold worth 4 *xerafins* (Pieris, 1949, pp. 27-28). Historian Paul E. Pieris puts together data from this *tombo* to make a list of those who make arrack and what they pay. His list includes nine women and nine men, including one *chalea*, one *parava*, one *carea* and fifteen *chandas* and the total amount due to the state came to ten *larims* and one *fanam* (1949, pp. 32-33).

Changes under colonial rule

However, even when traditional obligations were unchanged, the way in which these obligations were recorded and thus legitimized, led to shifts in authority. For instance, in pre-colonial times, most land was inherited or vested by the state in return for service and records of obligations for holding such lands seem to have been maintained by local officials. In rare instances when land was purchased, proof of such purchase was recorded in palm leaf (*ola*) documents which were in the possession of the purchaser.¹⁸ While records of land revenues and other dues were recorded in colonial documents for the convenience of the colonial power, it gradually led to a situation where the legitimacy of land ownership and traditional rights and obligations were now in the hands of colonial rulers and their paper records.¹⁹ This was yet another means of strengthening colonial control over the indigenous elite.

¹⁶ A *cacha* or *kachchi* is a roll of cloth. At a meeting in the house of the Controller of Revenue on August 20, 1613, to prevent harassment in collection of dues, it was agreed that the value of a *cacha* would be fixed at 3 *larins* and that for a *pingo* at 5 *fanams*.

¹⁷ *Caravado* is dried fish. A *pingo* is a pliant piece of wood about five feet long carried on the shoulder at each end of which is a basket.

¹⁸ For instance, according to the *tombo* of 1614, at Chunapetime, Tucanahe *gentio* (non-Christian) had a garden with 15 coconut trees and Xembaperuma *gentio* had one with 30 coconut trees (of which 2 were designated for the production of *sura*). In both cases it was noted that the land was purchased and the *ola* of purchase was produced.

¹⁹ For the story of Dutch attempts to gradually take over the record-keeping and legitimizing of land registration see Lyna and Bulyen (2023).



Figure 3: Sketch drawn by Constantino de Sa de Miranda in 1624, Biblioteca Nacioanl de Madrid. Ms.8930,f.189

Conditions also changed under the new regime. De Macedo imposed an additional one per cent to the customs dues for revenues to pay for the maintenance of the fort and an additional half per cent to pay extra fees (*lagimas dos officiaes*) for officials (Abeyasinghe, 1966, p. 170; Pieris, 1949, p. 26). He also imposed a levy of a tenth of the catch on the eight *tones* that fished in the deep seas from Negombo. There were ten other *tones* that participated in deep sea fishing from the shore of Pitivancarê (Pitipan Karai). Nine of them paid 25 *fanams* each to the king while the other paid dues to the caste chief (*patamgatim*) in the time of Rajasinha of Sitawaka. Captain Lourenço Teixeira de Macedo imposed on these vessels a new tax of a tenth of the catch. Also, in 1614 it was laid down that all arecanut had to be sold to the crown at 4 *larims* an *amuna*.²⁰ By the 1630s if not earlier, payment given to producers for arecanut came to be made in cloth and the value of the cloth given in exchange per *amuna* of arecanut fell to two and a half *larims* instead of four. The number of nuts per *amuna* was also gradually increased from 24,000 to 32,000 and this more than nullified the price increase from 4 to 5 *fanams* per *amuna* decreed by Viceroy Pero da Silva in a *regimento* issued to *vedor* Antonio da Fonseca Ozouro on 13, Sept. 1637.²¹ Evidence seems to indicate that, at least in this locality, colonial rule led to greater exactions from local fishermen and agricultural producers.

In addition, the indigenous elite began to lose some of their land when Portuguese officials and residents began to take over productive lands and gardens. Captain Lourenço Teixeira de Macedo himself took possession of two pieces of

²⁰ *Arquivo Nacional da Torre de Tombo*, Lisbon, *Livros das Moncoes*, 18, f. 240v.

²¹ *Ibid.*, State Archives of Goa, *Regimentos e Instrucoes*, III, ff. 2-8; C. R. de Silva (1972, p. 208).

garden land, and Gaspar Pereira, Secretary of Negombo port took over the adjoining garden (Pieris, 1949, p. 30). There also emerges a picture of the beginnings of an absentee Portuguese landlord group. The *tombo* of 1614 records that Jorge Fernandez de Abreu, a Portuguese resident of Colombo owned a garden with 80 coconut palms, some of which were used by four resident *chandas* to produce alcoholic liquor (Pieris, 1949 p, 32). In addition, the *tombo* also records that Gaspar Pereira, a married Portuguese settler living in Colombo held a garden with 20 old coconut trees in Patiny and was awarded another garden with 50 coconut trees in Chetie China (Hettihena) according to a grant (*merce*) from the Viceroy of India.

There are indications that some of the changes under Portuguese rule were detrimental to trade through Negombo. In the 1590s, while the export duty on arecanuts at Negombo (and Chilaw) remained at one and a half *larins* per *amuna*, the duty paid on arecanut exported from Colombo was one *larim* per *amuna* (C. R. de Silva, 1975, p. 115). This is likely to have temporarily diverted some trade from Negombo to Colombo. Even so, the Revenue Register of 1599 records that customs revenue in Negombo from vessels were three to four thousand *pardãos* a year²² and in any case, by 1614, customs on arecanut exports at all ports was standardized at one *larim* per *amuna*, except at Puttalam where it was one and a half *larins* per *amuna* (C. R. de Silva, 1972, p. 208). New restrictions relating to the export of cinnamon also affected Negombo. Cinnamon exports do not seem to have been restricted in the time of the rulers of Kotte. By 1597, Colombo seems to have been designated as the only port through which cinnamon could be exported. By a contract signed on November 7, 1595, cinnamon export was made a monopoly of Thomé de Souza Ronches, Captain of Colombo who pledged to sell a third of the first 500 *bahars* exported from Colombo to the king of Portugal at cost price. While this monopoly was breached by the right of several individuals and institutions to export fixed quantities of cinnamon, the only port of export remained Colombo and in 1614, when cinnamon was declared a royal monopoly, Colombo remained the sole authorized port of export to the detriment of ports like Negombo.²³

Conversion to Roman Catholicism proceeded apace with a number of churches being built by Franciscans. In the 1620s, as Fernão de Queyroz (1930) reported,

In Nigumbo the Fathers had a large and beautiful church of the Mother of God. On the other side of the river of Negombo, which leads to the bar is the Church of the Holy Ghost. Half a league to the East is the church of

²² *Ibid.*

²³ C. R. de Silva (1972, pp.193-197). The first agreement to collect cinnamon and to sell one third of it to the Portuguese state at cost price seems to have been made in 1590 (Abeyasinghe, 1966, pp. 143-144). The *tombo* of 1614 records that people of the *salagama* (chalea) caste collected 100 *bahars* of cinnamon from the forest (Abeyasinghe, 1966, p. 141; Pieris, 1949, p. 63). A *bahar* was about 400-500 lbs in weight.

the most Holy Trinity. Half a league from there to the south, in the village of Bonauolana (Bolawalana), was a large church, Our Lady of Remedies. Thence, one league to the East, in the village of Gaboyua, the Church of St. Mary of Jesus, new and beautiful with its cloisters and cells. Another league to the south, in the village of Velicara (possibly Welisara), another church and New Christianity. (p.718)

While Hindu and Buddhist temples as well as Islamic mosques were destroyed, the 1614 *tombo* gives us reason to believe that while most land holders were Christians, non-Christians continued to hold land and lived in some numbers in Negombo. Twenty six of twenty seven persons holding land at Rua dos Mouros are recorded as Muslims and one of them is recorded as their chief (*mayoraal*). Five of 72 landholders at Pitivancare (Pitipan Karai) and Chetie Chena (Hetti Hena) are specifically recorded as *gentio* or non-Christian. At Chunapetime (Hunupitiya), Pereamula (Pereamulla), and Patiny, out of about 330 landholders, more than 100 were recorded as *gentios* (Non-Christians) and five as *mouros* (Muslims). Also, judging by their recorded names, the local officials who testified about dues from Negombo at a meeting in Colombo on August 20, 1613 comprised of seven Christians, two Muslims and two *chettis* (Pieris, 1949, p. 26). In fact, it is clear that the Muslim community was well thought of in the Negombo area because when the Portuguese decided to expel all Muslims from Kotte in 1628, the people of Negombo (and those of Galle and Alutgama) petitioned Captain General Constantino de Sa de Noronha against expulsion of the Muslims saying that they enriched the area (C. R. de Silva, 1972, p. 72; Queyroz, 1930, p. 745).



Figure 4: Sketch drawn by Constantino de Sa de Miranda, Biblioteca Universitaária, Sargoça, M13



Figure 5: Sketch of of Negombo in the 1630s by Pedro Barreto de Resende

The data on the population of the locality of Negombo are scanty. The *tombo* of 1614 records 764 holdings of land of which some 50 are recorded as being held by women (often widows). The names of female landholders holding property close to Negombo fort as recorded in the *tombo* of 1614 included Maria Fernandez, widow of António Fernandez, Marta Fernandez, widow of Xemba (both near Rua Grande), Chavari and Nilinigri (both in Udayartoppu), mother of Francisco de Souza, Maria Fernandez, widow of *Nila cutia*, Luiza Fernandez, widow of *Areapule*, widow of Balthezar Teixeira, Catherina Fernandez, widow of *viriacuti*, widow Nilame, Luzia, widow of Paullo Fernandez or *Cardemgui*, Anna Matheus, widow of *Cutaperuma*, *Angellanetã*, widow of Francisco Martinz, widow Maria Fernandez, or *arian*, widow Fernandez or *caturioviriacuti* and Maria Fernandez, widow of Salvador Fernandez *namguede* (all near Rua Cruz). This was from a list of about 200 landholders. Nilinigui was a caste washer to the *salagamas* (Pieris, 1949, p. 29). Given that a few of the owners held two or more pieces of land and (despite the absence of specific data) if we assume that each landholder might have had a family of three to four persons, the locality is likely to have had over 2500 inhabitants without counting the landless. There are indications that the number of landless might have been considerable especially those from groups like the *karavas*. The *tombo* of 1614 records only 17 *karavas* or *careas* holding land in Negombo, although it also records 70 fishing nets and 25 inshore fishing boats. Thus, the population of Negombo and its environs could have been several thousands more than that of the landholding group. Given that the population of Portuguese Kotte at this time has been estimated at around 350,000 or less, and that the *tombo* records the existence of 5182 villages excluding Bulatgama and the coast, Negombo was clearly one of the significant centers of population in the island. Some of the villages in the kingdom of Kotte were quite small. Nugama in the Siyane Korale had only 15 houses and Pitawala, Kalupedilla, and Waharakgoda in the Five Korales recorded only five landholding families each (C. R. de Silva, 1975, pp. 83-84, 128-129, 136). The Portuguese tried to compensate for any reduction in population due to disaffection with their rule by encouraging the settlement of *paravar* Christians from South India. The *paravars* were a fishing community in the Coromandel coast of South India who had been converted to Christianity but had to face hostility from the Hindu rulers who dominated the inland areas. It was argued by the Portuguese that the settlement of these people in the north eastern coast of Sri Lanka would provide them a safe refuge (Perniola, 1989, pp. 375-385). Historian Tikiri Abeyasinghe (1966, pp. 60, 62-63) has suggested that this project did not achieve success, except for the settlement of a few families in Kalpitiya, north of Negombo. However, data from the *tombo* of 1614 indicate that by that time, eighteen *paravars* held land in the vicinity of Negombo mostly in the area known as Dalur (Dalupota) and had João da Cruz as their own caste headman or

patamgatim.²⁴ It is likely that the concentration of some caste and religious groups in certain areas (such as the *paravars* in Dalupota and Muslims in Rua dos Mouros) simply followed practices from olden times. However, the *tombo* of 1614 makes it clear that certain areas such as Pereamulla had a mixture of castes and religions including Christians, Muslims, and those of other religions and landholders there included *karavas*, *paravas*, *chandas*, and *chettis*. Paul E. Pieris (1949, p.29) notes that many names of landholders in the Negombo region indicate a South Indian origin.

On the other hand, there are significant gaps in the data available on local socio-economic conditions. For example, the records in the Portuguese *tombos* (land registers) omit all references to *chena* lands (lands under shifting cultivation). While they record the number of coconut trees in gardens (because there was a tax levied on each coconut tree) the *tombos* do not record other trees, including fruit trees, such as mango. Nor is there any data on arecanut cultivation because the colonial state received revenue from the compulsory purchase of arecanuts and the location of the trees did not matter to the state. There is also virtually no information on domestic animals (and wild animals in the neighboring forests) or on social practices in the locality including events such as pilgrimages, social festivals and labor-sharing during harvest.

Challenges to Portuguese rule

The Portuguese hold on Negombo and its environs came under threat after the defeat of Portuguese Captain General Constantino de Sa de Noronha at Randeniwela after his invasion of Kandy in 1630. It was not merely that the Portuguese had lost the battle and had their Captain General killed, it was also that the local soldiers and their trusted commanders on whom the Portuguese relied upon had deserted and joined the forces of the King of Kandy who attacked Portuguese possessions with the aim of driving them out of Sri Lanka. Lourenço Teixeira de Macedo, hearing of the defeat at Randeniwela hastily recruited 500 men (*lascarins*) from nearby regions of the Seven Korales to help the forty Portuguese soldiers and *casados* to defend the fort and the area around it. He thus kept control of some nearby villages and continued to get provisions from them after Colombo came under attack.

²⁴ Pieris (1949, p.28). The names and properties of *paravars* in the Negombo area recorded in the *tombo* of 1614 (AHU 484 as described in footnote 8 above) are as follows: In Pereamulla, António da Cruz, with 150 coconut trees, and another garden with 15, Gaspar de Menezes with 40, Manoel da Cruz with 25, In Dalupota, Manoel Vaz with 55, António Fernandez with 90, Bertolameu Fernandez with 13, João da Cruz with 10, Nicolão Fernandez with 15, João Fernandez with 15, João de Mello de Menezes with 120, Paullo Fernandez with 50, Thome Fernandez with 50, Andre Fernandez with 25 and another garden with 30, Manoel Vaz with 40, João Fernandez with 80, Manoel with 20, João da Cruz (*parava patamgatim*) with 150 (10 of the trees for *sura* or toddy) and two forested areas and two forests with old coconut trees, and Manoel Fernandez with 20.

However, in October 1630, 1300 Sinhalese forces led by Dom Jeronimo Rajapaksa and Prince Vijayapala of Matale attacked Negombo. They were beaten off by *lascarins* led by a *casado* of Colombo, Manoel Gil. As hostile forces continued to attack across the bay as well as on the landward side, de Macedo appealed for help from Colombo and received a detachment of 20 Portuguese under Jorge Fernandez de Abreu. The new Captain General, Lançarote de Seixas, laid a plan to counter attack the besiegers with the forces arriving with Dom Bras de Castro, Captain Major of the Coromandel fleet to rescue the Portuguese in Sri Lanka and with de Macedo's forces. De Castro arrived off Negombo with a diminished fleet on November 26, 1630 having lost several of his ships due to bad weather and an encounter with the Dutch. Neither de Castro nor de Macedo was willing to take the risks of an offensive operation and eventually De Castro went on to Colombo. Negombo remained besieged and suffered several attacks by the besiegers until the end of 1631. During that year, it was one of only five forts held by the Portuguese in Sri Lanka, apart from their fortifications in the old Jaffna kingdom (C. R. de Silva, 1972, pp. 124, 131-136; Queyroz, 1930, p. 783).²⁵

In 1632-1633, however, the Portuguese, reinforced by forces from Goa, were able to drive away the forces besieging Colombo and captured much of the Kelani valley and lands to the south of it. It was this development that eventually persuaded Senerat, King of Kandy (1604-1635) to agree in January 1634 to a peace treaty that handed back all of the land the Kandyans had gained control of after 1630 (C. R. de Silva, 1972, pp. 136-142). The peace treaty enabled the Portuguese in Negombo to reoccupy the surrounding area and resume revenue collection and conversion. However, available data indicates that the process of resumption of power was not quite complete. Thus, for example, the listing of churches in Negombo in Paulo da Trindade's work lists only two churches: "The Church of Nigombo: In the fortress of Nigombo, five leagues North of Colombo we have a beautiful church, dedicated to the Mother of God (Madre de Deus) and almost two thousand souls" and "The Church of Pitipao Care (Pitipan Karai or Pitipana): On the other side of the river from Negombo, in the direction of its mouth we have a small church dedicated to the Holy Ghost with over 700 Christians" (Trindade, 1972, pp. 147-148).

Available evidence suggests that the Portuguese gained control of the lands around Negombo in the early 1630s, but not for long, because the Portuguese resumed war and invaded Kandy in 1638. The complete defeat of the Portuguese invading army at Gannoruwa on May 27-28, 1638 and the alliance signed by Rajasinha II (1635- 1687) signaled the end of Portuguese domination over Negombo. On December 28, 1639, a Kandyan army advanced to Negombo. King Rajasinha joined

²⁵ The other forts the Portuguese held on to were Colombo, Galle, Batticaloa and Trincomalee. In the north, they retained the fort of Mannar repulsing an attack but their control over the Jaffna peninsula was not challenged.

them soon after and a Dutch contingent assisted in the assault on Negombo fort which surrendered on February 10, 1640. Historian Fr. Quéré (1995, p. 50) mentions that to the consternation of the Portuguese, the local Christian converts seem to have rendered minimal assistance to the garrison. Although the Portuguese regained Negombo in a counter-attack on November 14th of that year, it was recaptured by a Dutch force on January 9, 1644, and thenceforth, the Dutch ruled Negombo until their expulsion by the British at the end of the eighteenth century (Goonewardena, 1958, pp. 18-29, 25-56, 66-75; Winus, 1971, 49-72). However, Negombo was part of two more dramatic moments in the mid-seventeenth century. On March 9, 1645, the Dutch, made an alliance with the Portuguese and declared war against Kandy in May of that year. Their military campaign failed and in May 1646, the Dutch were forced to retire to Negombo fort after losing several engagements with over 100 soldiers killed and some 340 left as prisoners of Rajasinha II and were forced to make peace with Kandy with conciliatory letters and presents (C. R. de Silva, 1995a, p. 168; Goonewardena, 1958, pp. 96-132). Then again, in the early 1650s, the Portuguese made an attempt from Colombo to capture Negombo fort but were repulsed. The Catholic converts in Negombo lost the services of their priests, especially after the Dutch expelled the priests in 1647, although a few might have made a few clandestine visits to tend to their flock (Goonewardena, 1958, p. 146).

Conclusion

This study began with the presumption that when we examine the history of colonized areas, because of the destruction of local records, especially those pertaining to the periods before the nineteenth century, we would often need to utilize records archived in the centers of colonial power in Europe. As the above examination of the history of Negombo from the sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century demonstrates, this dependence results in some *lacunae* in local histories. For example, due to the destruction of local sources, there are grave difficulties in uncovering the history of religious monuments of Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus (prior to their destruction) in these areas. Nevertheless, research on this topic has shown that data from colonial sources often illuminates local political history. More importantly, these sources give us some insights on economic and social practices within localities. It is possible to build at least a glimpse of both the changes and the continuities in the life of the people, as well as the economic burdens imposed on them by the state during colonial rule. Colonial sources also provide evidence on social changes that resulted from colonial policies which impacted the community in the eighteenth century and beyond (see Dewasiri, 2008 for a regional history during the period 1740-1800). Despite the dismantling of Roman Catholic churches by Dutch Calvinists, there is also some data (from Portuguese archival and chronicler accounts) on Roman Catholic churches and on Catholic efforts at

conversion. Nevertheless, as Ann Stoler (2009) has pointed out, modern historians need to pay attention to how colonial assumptions and sentiments have influenced the nature of the archival recordings relating to colonized areas, and consider the extent to which we are influenced by the limitations of these records. Bearing such limitations in mind, specific studies of more localities during the same time period, as well as during the two subsequent centuries²⁶ could well help us to understand the extent to which many of the changes and continuities which have been identified in this study extended across the entire country and as to how many of them were more specific to certain localities and regions.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare

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²⁶ A good example of a locality or regional center (which was not a historical capital city) that has attracted attention to its history is Galle. See Paranavitana (2005) and numerous entries in *thuppahi.com*, a blog run by historian Michael Roberts who grew up in Galle.

²⁷ Page references in text are to translation in Abeyasinghe, T. B. H. (1995). Antonio Bocarro's Description of Ceylon Translated into English. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka*, 39, i–84.

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