

University of Colombo Review (Series III),
Vol.6, No.2, 2025

An analysis of Portuguese colonial representations of Sinhalese women

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ABSTRACT

The history of Sri Lanka until recently has been written mostly as the history of men in the country. This has been particularly true of the early modern period, for which existing records are mostly those of visiting colonizers who were mostly men, writing about their dealings with those in power or with those from whom they could gain profit. This article is an attempt to collect and analyze the admittedly limited data on how the Portuguese who gained political authority over parts of the coastal areas saw local women. It is limited to the women of the majority community because data on minority women is very limited. Using data relating to land ownership, marriage practices and pictorial representations, as well as accounts of Sinhalese women who held positions of power, this study attempts to widen our vision of the past. While the evidence we can gather indicates that some Sinhalese women were seen as able to hold and inherit land and wield influence by developing autonomous spheres of activity in specific domains, the prevalence of such limited agencies should not obscure the asymmetry of power under which they operated, both in respect of gender and of colonial dominance.

KEYWORDS:
Sri Lanka, Kotte, Kandy, Samudra Devi, Dona Catherina, Land Inheritance, Marriage, Caste, Dress, Conversion

Suggested Citation: de Silva, C.R. & Hettiarachchy, R. (2025). An analysis of Portuguese colonial representations of Sinhalese women. *University of Colombo Review* (New Series III), 6(2), 05-25.

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Introduction and discussion of theoretical issues

This is a study of sixteenth and seventeenth century Portuguese colonial representations of Sinhalese women based on documents of the time, both published accounts and manuscripts in archives in Portugal and Spain. Although the Portuguese arriving in Sri Lanka (the Indian Ocean island which they called Ceilão) encountered women belonging to other ethnic groups such as Tamils, Moors, and Malays, the analysis that follows will deal solely with women from the majority ethnic group in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese, because the evidence that is available has negligible data on these other groups of women. Further, due to the nature of the available evidence, the article is restricted to how agents of the Portuguese empire viewed the Sinhalese women whom they physically encountered or gathered information on through written and oral evidence that these agents received.

The investigation is complicated due to a number of factors. A key element is that colonial representations are multiple and varied, depending on the viewpoint of the colonial author who originates the document and the extent of familiarity of the author with the subject. As Greg Denning pointed out, arriving after a long voyage the colonial voyager comes to the colonized land as an outsider, a foreigner; and looking across the beach, the voyager sees a different land, perhaps savage, perhaps romantic, but always uncontrollable. The signs, gestures and codes that the voyager had been accustomed to in the past could not be relied upon any longer. On the other hand, when deciphering new information, the visitor could only process information in the light of his or her own preconceptions. When the colonizer looks at the Sri Lankan 'other' in terms of language, color, gender, religion and so on, he or she comprehends what he sees only in terms of what he knows. Even when the visitor observes and records, the visitor "does not see the islander's colors or trees or mountains. He sees his [own]" (Denning, 1988, p. 34). In other words, as Elizabeth Chaplin put it, "representations articulate not only visual or verbal codes and conventions but also the social practices and forces which underlie them, with which we interpret the world" (Chaplin, 1994, p. 1).

That is not all. As Lesbia Amézaga Rivera points out, in evaluating colonial writings and representations, one might not only have to consider misunderstandings but also "what has been, with all probable intention, left out" (Rivera, 2017, p. 10). Then again, there is the filter through which the modern analyst views the evidence. Stuart Hall explains that "[e]verything in a sense is visible in the painting. And yet, what it is 'about'—its meaning—depends on how we 'read' it. It is as much constructed around what you can't see as what you can" (Hall, 1997, p. 59).

Moreover, in terms of Portuguese colonial representations, there are other important considerations. Much of the colonial documentation which might have provided images has not survived (partly due to the Lisbon earthquake of 1755). What has remained appears to be mostly correspondence from Portuguese officials

to the ruler or by missionaries to their superiors, detailing political events, religious conversions, and economic concerns. Since virtually all of the Portuguese authors whose documents have survived were reports by male officials, who chiefly dealt with local males in power, references to women and their concerns are rare. Additionally, we need to be conscious that when we use the term 'Portuguese' in the early modern period, we are using a constructed image. As Angela Xavier has pointed out, it was only during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries that cultural differences became more explicit in the Iberian Peninsula and when identification as a Portuguese as opposed, that is, to being a foreigner (which frequently meant identifying a person as a Spaniard) started to be formulated. Before that, the identity of people was loose and varied, both geographically and chronologically, depending on the ruler, but also on whether the individuals were regarded as foreigners or neighbours (*vizinhos*) by the local society (Xavier, 2015).

Nevertheless, there are a few ways in which some evidence of gendered images might be extracted. Reports on economic conditions such as landownership and on social practices like marriage provide some documentation on the position of women in Sri Lankan society. Additionally, descriptions and illustrations of Sinhalese women in chronicles and reports provide a few clues. Finally, there are references to women of royal lineage who held power.

Evidence from Economic Data

Let us begin with evidence from reports of economic conditions. Portuguese reports indicate that Sinhalese women were entitled to own and inherit land. Thus, for example, the revenue register of 1599 referring to the 15 villages of Kadupiti Mādampe, records that they belonged to "Dom João (Dharmapāla) but that he inherited them from his father and mother (*por ficar de seu pay e may*)" (de Almeida, 1975, p. 135). The Portuguese did not highlight this as anything special, because in Portugal itself, under the Ordenacões Filipinas,[1] women had rights of inheritance and property and widows had access to their family heritage (see Da Silva, 2002; Sperling 2005; Candido and Rodrigues, 2015). It seems clear that the Portuguese continued to allow inheritance by women in the areas of Sri Lanka which they conquered and ruled. While most of the landholders registered in the *tombo* (land and revenue register) of 1614 seem to be male, there are instances of women recorded as holding property and paying dues to the state. For example, in the vicinity of Negombo, several women were recorded as holding and paying dues for houses where arrack

1 *Ordenações Filipinas* was a good collection of laws in force under the rulers of Spain and Portugal.

(*Vinho Arraca*) was distilled (Pieris, 1948, pp. 32-33).[2] Also, it seems clear that widows could inherit land, as seen from the *tombo* of 1614. S. G. Perera's summary of a small part of the tombo records a widow holding the *paraveni* (heritable) land in the village of Yahalekumbura (Perera, 1938, p. 21). A perusal of the unpublished parts of this *tombo* also reveal that after twenty years of Portuguese rule, widows, irrespective of their religion were allowed to hold land under the Portuguese. For instance, Nachiame, a non-Christian widow, held two gardens with twenty five and three coconut trees respectively in an area near Negombo identified as Chunapetim and Pati Amé, widow of Pocapule held two pieces of land at nearby Pitjvamcarẽ with 40 coconut trees and three *pālas*[3] of paddy.[4] However, as the locals complained in the Petition of 1636, as colonial rule continued, occasionally, widows of *lascarins* (local soldiers serving the colonial rulers) were not allowed to inherit land:

> ". . . as soon as one of us dies, they at once take our *paravenias,* because our wives are unable to perform the same service, nor do they give them to others who serve in the place of the dead, and thus, our wives as well as our children perish, and they do not regard the fact . . . that they must give our wives and children some means of sustenance" (de Queyroz, 1930, p. 1016).

Thus, it seems clear that the Portuguese accepted the rights of Sinhalese women to hold and inherit land as long as they paid the traditional dues to the state, except that in the seventeenth century they removed the right of women to inherit land for which the obligation was to provide a person for military service, even if the women provided one of their family to perform this service.

Evaluation of Social Practices

The Portuguese also clearly noted deviations from their own monogamous Christian marriage practices. As historian Fernão de Queyroz noted, in Sri Lanka,

2 The entries as summarized by Pieris read as follows: "The wife of Chiliviri who lives in Chunapeti pays the King yearly 8 *fanam*, The wife of Urgam Pallea, Chanda at Patti, 5f.. . The wife of Viriduria, Chanda, at Preamulla, 5f, . . . The wife of old Duria at Preamulla, 5f, The mother of Gpar, Parava at Preamulla, 5f, . . . The mother of Tomee, Chanda at Pati, 10f, . . . The wife of Chele Peruma, Arache, Chanda, 10f,. . . The wife of Carea, Chanda at Pati, 9f., The wife of Dombalea, Chanda at Pati, 4f.,. . . The mother of Bastião, Chanda at Preamulla, 10f. . ." Pieris's work (1948, p. 28) indicates that women were often in charge of distilling arrack in other areas of Kotte too. (Note that despite the title which states 1593, the book is a partial summary of the Portuguese *tombo* of Kotte, 1614.). On the value of a *fanam* in Kotte see footnote 9.

3 In paddy land, traditionally the extent was measured according to the extent of land on which a specified quantity of seed could be sown. A p*ā*la was made up of about 2 roods or half an acre and four *pālas* made up one *amuna*.

4 A manuscript of a substantial part of the *tombo* of 1614 is available in codices 222, 280 and 484 of the Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino, Lisbon and a copy of this has been deposited in the National Archives, Colombo.

> ". . . it is common practice of four or five brothers or more to marry one single woman, and on the contrary, one single man may marry many sisters and the youngest ever holds the first place in authority and power in the house and even in love. . . " (de Queyroz, 1930, p. 91).

Monogamous and polygamous marriages existed as well. Joris van Spilbergen, writing in the first decade of the seventeenth century commented, "The tradition in *Celon, Candy* and everywhere in the island is that a man can marry any number of women as long as he is able to maintain them" (Spilbergen, 1997, p. 42).[5] However, as João Ribeiro noted, at least in the south-west of the country, polyandry was the rule (Ribeiro, 1948, p. 50). Polyandry was also prevalent in the royal family as recorded by the Sinhalese chronicle, the *Rājāvaliya* (*Rājāvaliya,* 1976, p. 215). Commentators such as João Ribeiro acknowledged some benefits of polyandrous marriages:

> ". . . the woman who is married to a husband with a large number of brothers is considered very fortunate, for all toil and cultivate for her and bring whatever they earn to the house and she lives much honoured and well supported" (Ribeiro, 1948, p. 50).

The Portuguese also noted the ease with which a marriage could be dissolved. As de Queyroz stated,

> ". . . But in order to separate, each one's wish is sufficient, who taking what was brought to the household may go back and marry at pleasure; and if they had children, the males are entrusted to the Father and the females to the Mother; and if all are males or females, then they divide, each one taking what falls to him by lot" (de Queyroz, 1930, p. 91).

Given the Christian emphasis on the sanctity of marriage, it is unlikely that the ease of the dissolution of the marriage bond would have met with Portuguese approval.[6] Moreover, the attitude of many Portuguese, steeped in their Roman Catholic faith, understandably seem to have been hostile to polyandrous and polygamous practices, as is seen from the comment of de Queyroz on a polyandrous marriage that ran into difficulties and was bought before a Portuguese judge:

> " . . . there appeared before him a woman married to seven brothers to complain of the ill treatment she received from so many and begged in good earnest to be relieved of some of them. And as they were still subject to their laws and customs, the ouvidor [judge] asked her whether two would be enough for her

5 Indrani Iriyagolle (1989/1990, pp. 81, 91 & 96) has suggested that while polygamy existed in Sri Lanka since ancient times, polyandry probably developed after the thirteenth century AD.

6 Modern Sri Lankan scholars have pointed out that the right of women (as well as men) to dissolve marriages without legal restrictions indicates a more emancipated position for Sinhala women than for contemporary Europeans. See Harris, 1994, p. 26 quoting a paper presented by L. Dewaraja on The position of women in Buddhism with special reference to pre-colonial Sri Lanka at the Third Sri Lanka Conference, Amsterdam.

> and she replies that she would take four, and choosing those she liked, the case was settled; such are the fruits of paganism" (de Queyroz, 1930, p. 91).[7]

In time, the Portuguese gained some understanding of the complexity of Sinhalese marriage customs. As de Queyroz explained,

> " Among the Chingalas, however, though the lower folk buy wives, and the man brings a dowry and furniture with him and the woman [brings] only her personal ornaments, among the nobles there is a different fashion, for the bridegroom-elect sends a present to the Parents of the Bride, an article for each as a token of the contract, and they are obliged to give him the dowry agreed upon along with the daughter" (de Queyroz, 1930, p. 90).

It is worth noting that several Portuguese writers had very critical views of the Sinhalas, both men and women. António Bocarro was very clear in his opinion: "All Sinhalese are by nature treacherous, fickle and if any profit could be gained by doing so, will kill their own fathers [for it]" (Bocarro, 1995. p. 15). However, he also admitted that,

> ". . . much of the hatred that the Sinhalese bear towards the Portuguese is born of the oppressive conduct of those who rule over them, from the captain general down to the lowest official, not least among them being the lords of the villages who squeeze out not only the milk but their [i.e. the subjects] very blood as well and who [ill] use their daughters and wives [a mode of conduct] so unworthy of Christians" (Bocarro, 1995, p. 17).

The assessment of seventeenth century historian, Fernão de Queyroz was also quite negative:

> "As for the character of the Chingalas, they are generally, proud, vain, and lazy, the first on account of the presumption of their celestial descent, especially those of blood Royal, the second because of the antiquity of their Kingdom and nation, and the liberty in which they were always brought up; the third on account of the position, climate and riches of the land, which being so fertile both as regards what springs from it and what is entrusted to it, . . ." (de Queyroz, 1930, p. 21)

On the other hand, it was also recognized by some commentators that the reluctance of the Sinhalese to support the Portuguese and convert to Christianity was because of ill treatment by the colonizers. As Friar Paulo da Trinidade pointed out,

> "The treatment the Portuguese mete out to the converts is so tyrannical and cruel that it causes amazement. They torment these unfortunates as if they were enemies of the Faith, ordering them to stand in the sun in a circle they have drawn and if they leave the circle, they must pay a fine or they place a heavy stone on their occiputs with thorns underneath. The same torture they apply to the women, tying off their teats" (Trinidade, 1972, p. 169).

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7 Dutch commentators writing in the early seventeenth century confirmed the practice of polygamy in Sri Lanka.

In terms of the Portuguese impact on social practices such as marriage, it seems clear that the Portuguese authorities did not adopt a policy of reforming practices, except when the locals were converted to Christianity, after which they were punished for violating Christian social norms (Trinidade, 1972, pp. 168-169).

Evidence from Illustrations

The best-known illustration of Sinhalese women in Portuguese records is a single depiction of sixteenth century Sinhalese women included in a collection of paintings in Biblioteca Casanatense and published in *Imagens do Oriente (Matos, 1985)*. There can be some discussion on the extent to which the painting represents a 'colonial image' because, although Georg Schurhammer identified the artist as a Portuguese (Schurhammer, 1963, pp. 111-118), more recent scholars have argued that the painter is likely to have been of Indian origin, *albeit* one subject to Portuguese influence. One of them suggests that the artist was an Indian who might have lived for a time in Portuguese Goa (Losty, 2012), while others (Loureiro, 2012 and Fernandes, 1992) suggest that the Indian painter was directed by a Portuguese. Even if these suggestions are accepted, the fact that the painter was of Indian origin should not negate the value of his work representing a colonial gaze, although as Inez Zupanov has pointed out particularly for Portuguese artists,

> "The emphasis on the ideal and thus dreamlike quality of pictorial representation of Asian experience is a witness not so much to the inability to paint or draw real people and objects, but rather to the weight of ideological expectations that the empire pressed upon the shoulders of a very small cohort of officials, missionaries, and settlers in situ. This situation was an invitation to dissembling, careful self-presentation, and self-aggrandizement. As one of the travellers remarked with a tinge of spite, the Portuguese in India, of even the lowest extraction, showed off on the streets of Goa their aristocratic status" (Zupanov, 2016, p. 262).



Figure 1: Image of Sinhalese Women from Biblioteca Casanatense, 1889, p.109.

The artist who configured the depiction seems to have chosen one group of Sinhalese women who could be distinguished clearly from drawings of other groups, such as Arab merchants or Hindu deities in the same collection. The picture, which is entitled *'molhares chingualas'* or 'Sinhalese women', depicts a group of women having a conversation. It is not clear whether the individuals picking coconuts depicted behind them are men or women. In any case, the lack of clothing above the waist seems to indicate that the women depicted belonged to a certain caste, which had a dress code that forbade the covering of one's upper body. Caste dress codes were clearly enforced in Sinhalese society for as João Ribeiro pointed out, even in the seventeenth century, "It is not possible for them, wherever they are, to conceal their caste, as this is always evident from their clothes; for they may not wear their cloth below their knees, while those of high caste have it down to the middle of the leg" (Ribeiro, 1948, p. 51). Therefore, if we look at the painting as a representation, clearly, this picture does not depict all Sinhalese women, for the dress codes as explained by Ribeiro (above) were different for different castes. However, the lack of clothing might also perform a different function. As Peter Mason remarked in his analysis of some seventeenth century depictions of native Brazilians by a painter from the Netherlands, "they *are* what Europe is *not*. To be more precise, they are a negative self-definition of the European ruling class" (Mason, 1989, p. 52).[8]

8 The italics in the quote are those of the author, Mason.

The Portuguese also clearly tried to use dress to distinguish those who became Christian converts from those who remained loyal to their traditional faiths. A royal decree of 1559 proclaimed that,

> ". . [f]urther, keeping in view of God's service and mine, I decree that in those regions no pagan or other infidel, of whatever status or condition he may be, shall be allowed to possess or wear the dress or apparel proper to the Christians, unless he has some distinctive mark by which he is clearly and immediately recognized as a pagan or a Moor, and this on penalty of forfeiting such a dress or paying two *cruzados*[9] to the one who has reported him. This penalty shall be incurred every time a person is seen wearing such a dress" (Perniola, 1989, p. 361).



Figure 2: Portuguese Women in India from Biblioteca Casanatense, 1889, p. 95.

The artist's effort to distinguish Christian women in India from those of other faiths is shown by Figure 2 above, which depicts these women in Portuguese dress. However, the significance of the distinctions made in the colonial gaze might be construed as going beyond that. As Amanda Blair Runyan argues, representations of

9 The value of coins in Portuguese Asia varied slightly according to the place and time but a *cruzado* was valued at 400 *reis* (324 *reis* in early 16th century), a *fanam* at 4.5 to 5 reis, a *larim* at 20 *fanams* or 90-100 *reis* (lower value in early 16th century) and a *pagoda* (Indian gold coin) at 400 *reis*. Three *larims* equalled one *xerafim*. It was reported that in 1630 a *xerafim* could buy 240 coconuts or 12 to 15 fowls, or 30-36 measures of rice or three large loaves of bread. See de Silva, 1972, p. 190 and H. W. Codrington, 1914.

the woman's body are central to the project of colonialism and colonialism focuses on dress as an important trope of colonial power (Runyan, 2016, p. 8). She argues that "the appearance, or visual representation, of women in colonial spaces makes colonizing powers visually explicit, and extends the colonial project to the body of the female colonial subject" (Runyan, 2016, p. 9). Indeed, one might also speculate whether the artiste who drew the paintings in Biblioteca Casanatense drew Sinhalese women (and men) as scantily clad in contrast to depictions of Chinese and Malay women but very much like African women in an attempt to depict them as 'less civilized.' This might well be related to the adoption of Portuguese styles of dress including a long-sleeved jacket and a dress like a long robe by Sinhalese women. These styles were adopted by royalty in Kotte in Portuguese times (Karunaratne, 2017, p.30)[10] and became prevalent in southwest Sri Lanka well into the twentieth century.

In addition, one scholar has pointed out that the depiction of males with weapons, and women without them, might represent a message that men were seen as more aggressive and dominant (Boogaart, 2012, p. 83).[11] There might be some merit in this analysis. There are only a few depictions of men without weapons in his paintings. It is therefore possible to see Sinhalese women in these paintings as "the victims of both colonialist ideology, which devalues them because of their race and cultural ancestry, and patriarchal ideology, which devalues them because of their sex" (Tyson 2006, p. 421. See also Shabanirad and Marandi, 2015). Women are seen as idling in conversation, while the men are brandishing their weapons for conflict.

The representations of the dress of Sinhalese women in colonial literary sources are more extensive than those in the visual.[12] The most comprehensive description of the dress of Sinhalese women is provided by historian Fernão de Queyroz:

> "Up to twelve years they grow some small locks and with the hair itself without other ornament they make [sort of] roll, which falls on the left side, and unless they are Widows, they wear what jewels they can on their breasts, the richest

10 For descriptions and illustrations of such dresses from contemporary sources see Karunaratne, 2017, pp. 99-100, 123-124.

11 The image of Sri Lankan men given in Figure 3 below is tagged 'people who are called Chingualas, of the island of Ceilam where there is cinnamon.'

12 The only other visual records of Sri Lankan women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are in the ivory boxes made in Kotte. These boxes were made in Sri Lanka, presumably by local craftsmen, but Amin Jaffer and Melanie Anne Schwabe argue that the casket at the Albert and Victoria Museum in London (possibly constructed in 1563) which shows two identical heads of women, the upper in Sinhala dress and the lower in European dress, represent King João Dharmapala's wife and that the carvings indicate European influence. Jaffer and Schwabe, 1999, p. 9. For good surveys of Sri Lankan ivory boxes including those caskets exported from Sri Lanka to Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries see Hartkamp-Jonxis 2016; Vasallo e Silva, 2007; Meegama, 2017 and Biedermann, 2018.

and *baniana* women [wear] on their arms and their feet [jewels] of ivory, glass, silver or gold. . . . [The girls] even more than the boys, wear the garb of innocence up to the ninth or tenth year. Thereupon the common [women] wear a piece of cloth, white, red, or striped, twelve cubits of the hand in length and two in breadth, half of which they gird round the waist and the other half above the shoulders when they go to work, and when they wish to compose themselves, above their head, though some castes make of that cloth a sort of breeches; and very different are the ways in which they adjust that cloth, and as they are very poor, they have too few to change and they generally go about as tidy as a dish cloth. Other castes like the *Baniana* women make a sort of petticoat out of silk cloth and add a shawl which is a doublet in front and in public they cover their back with another piece of silk because all their finery consists in the many and costly Jewels, though [they are made] with so little art that they make a necklace of Venetians just as they come out of the mint." (de Queyroz, 1930, pp. 83-84)[13].



Figure 3: Sinhalese men from Biblioteca Casanatense 1889, p. 107

De Queyroz also noted that the Sinhalese walked with
"the feet generally unshod, as in all heathen India [for Portuguese in early modern times, the term India included Sri Lanka], though in the rest of the apparel [they appear] with great splendour and much jewellery of precious

13 By Venetians, he means gold coins. One might note that although de Queyroz, recognizes the variety in the dress of Sinhala women, he points to the uncleanliness of the dresses of the poor and the poor quality of the work in the ornaments of the wealthy.

> stones, necklaces, ear-rings, ear-drops, both of one sex and the other having ears so pierced, that they place in it a great part of their beauty." (de Queyroz, 1930, p. 22)
>
> ". . . Moors as well as Gentiles according to their castes are most resolute in conserving their own dresses, because thereby are they all distinguished from one another. . ." (de Queyroz, 1930, p. 22)

What is not highlighted in the documents is that many Portuguese soldiers who settled down in Sri Lanka married local women because few Portuguese women came in the ships that sailed to Asia at that time. Portuguese policy on this practice varied with time. In the early sixteenth century, Afonso de Albuquerque, the second Governor of the *Estado da Índia,* had defended the need for intermarriage though soldiers were advised to marry the whitest Asian women, who were also expected to convert to Christianity (Barros, 1988, p. 198). In time, the Portuguese authorities encouraged the transport of Portuguese orphans to the colonies, but due to a continued shortage of Portuguese women in the East, marriages between Portuguese settlers and descendants of mixed marriages continued (Cunha Rivara, 1877, Vol. VI. p. 806). Francisco Bethencourt has emphasized the value of these *casados* (married settlers) for the maintenance of Portuguese power. In his words,

> "The importance of the world of the *casados* in India has not been sufficiently stressed by the historiography. The strategy of the Portuguese authorities after the conquest of Goa in 1510 was to encourage marriage with women from the local elites, a practice that was widespread not only in the territories controlled by the Portuguese but in the peripheries of the empire. The strategy also involved the conversion, integration and mobilization of natives for war because of the small numbers of Portuguese in Asia." (Bethencourt, 2007, p. 214)

António Bocarro reported that by the 1630s there were close to 1500 Portuguese *casados* in Sri Lanka including 350 in Colombo, 70 in Galle, 30 each in Kalutara and Trincomalee and 20 in Jaffna (Bocarro, 1995, pp. 11, 17, 31, 33, 51, 57). Local opinion was less enthusiastic as seen in the *Rājāvaliya*:

> "From then onwards many women of low birth and those belonging to Ambatta caste, Kara caste, Hannali caste, the Hali caste, Dura caste and Goigei caste, all of them slept with Pratikal men. Ladies of the chiefs of the city of Kotte also with their greed for the wealth of the Pratikal, slept with them and became converted to Christianity" (*Rājāvaliya,* 1976, p. 221).

Cases of Prominent Sinhalese Women

Although Portuguese documents have very little information on Sinhalese women, references to women who were important political figures could provide insights on a possible hesitancy by the Portuguese to give credit to the power and

influence of Sinhalese women. One of these prominent women was Samudra Devi. Samudra Devi or Biso Adahasin as she is named in the Sinhalese chronicle, the *Rājāvaliya, (Rājāvaliya,* 1976, p. 221*)* has gained fame through her well-planned rescue of her husband Vidiye Bandāra, from Portuguese captivity around 1553. She was the daughter of Bhuvaneka Bahu, King of Kotte (1521-1551) and mother of Dom João Dharmapāla, King of Kotte (1551-1597). Her marriage was within the family as Vidiye Bandāra himself was a nephew of Bhuvaneka Bahu (Pieris, 1992, pp. 77-78, 132-133).

After Bhuvaneka Bahu was killed by a Portuguese soldier in 1551, Vidiye Bandāra assumed power in Kotte on behalf of his son, King Dharmapāla. This did not suit Portuguese plans and their desire to seize power led to the seizure and imprisonment of Vidiye Bandāra by the Portuguese troops who were in Kotte. The *Rājāvaliya* states that it was Vidiye Bandāra's spouse who organized a group called the pallaru to dig a tunnel and liberate Vidiya Bandāra from the cellar in which he was imprisoned (*Rājāvaliya*, 1976, p. 221).[14] This is confirmed by Diogo do Couto's account:

> "His wife, the king's mother, who, as we have said, affronted by the imprisonment of her husband, had gone off to the town of Rayigama (Reigão), as she was a prudent and courageous woman, being informed of the ill-treatment meted to her husband, took steps to release him thence by stratagem, since it could not be done by force, and putting herself in communication with some persons that she trusted, Portuguese, who had been disgusted by these excessive measures, she bribed so much and gave so much, that they made a mine in the garden of the Fathers,[15] upon which the prison looked, which led into the place where Tribuly[16] was, and by this they got him out one night and he was hurried away from the fortress . . . . . As soon as Tribuly found himself free from prison, as he bore in his heart the ill-treatment that had been accorded to him, collecting a large number of men, whom his wife had sent to him, he betook himself in the direction of Gale[17] and all the churches and Christians that he came across he put to fire and sword, not sparing anything" (Do Couto and De Barros, 1777-88, Vol VI -10-12 pp. 172).[18]

Couto might have exaggerated the role of Samudra Devi because she died soon after Vidiye's escape. Vidiye Bandāra promptly married Biso Bandāra, the daughter of Mayadunne of Sitawaka and the latter might have been the person instrumental in providing the military support to Vidiye Bandāra which Couto mentions, until there

14 The editor notes that one version of the manuscript has the word palhoru (thieves or brigands)
15 Franciscan friars
16 Vidiye Bandāra
17 Galle
18 Published in Perniola, 1989, p. 317. The translation from Portuguese to English was by Donald Ferguson.

emerged an agreement between Sitawaka and the Portuguese to join forces against Vidiye Bandāra. On the other hand, the account of seventeenth century Portuguese historian de Queyroz totally omits the role played by Samudra Devi (de Queyroz, 1930, p. 315). This omission not only disregards a courageous role played by a Sinhalese woman leader, but also the picture of a woman's command of considerable financial and other resources—resources she was able to use effectively to achieve her objective while her husband was imprisoned.

Another example of a Sri Lankan woman who appears in many Portuguese writings is Dona Catherina[19] who was the first woman of the royal family recorded to have become a steadfast Roman Catholic. Her story attracted interest among European writers in a way that no other Sinhalese royal figure did. Historian Alan Strathern has suggested that the story of Dona Catherina bears a resemblance to a tale in Miguel de Cervantes's Don Quixote, a book with stories of the travels of Don Quixote, a middle aged Spanish nobleman who took up his lance and sword to defend the helpless and destroy the wicked, while riding on his old horse, Rocinante and accompanied by a confused squire called Sancho Panza (Strathern, 2007, p. 1). As de Cervantes relates in his story, the

> "mighty emperor Alifanfaron, sovereign of the great isle of Taproban" was at war because Alifanferon, who is a most outrageous pagan, is enamoured of Pentapolin's daughter, a most beautiful and courteous lady, who being a Christian, her father will by no means betroth her to the infidel prince, unless he shall first renounce the law of the false prophet Mahomet, and become a convert to the true faith" (De Cervantes, 1998, p. 116).

While, at first glance, this story has only a limited resemblance to that of Dona Catherina, because she was in no way used to change the religion of a prince, a little further along, in volume two of *Don Quixote,* there is specific mention of Kandy and another likely reference to Dona Catherina, *viz.* "Of the famous kingdom of Candaya, situated between the great Taprobana and the South Sea, two leagues beyond Cape Camorim, Donna Maguncia was queen as widow of king Archipela, her lord and husband. . ." (De Cervantes, 1998, pp. 703-704)

Dona Catherina was the daughter of Karaliyadde Bandara who had taken refuge with the Portuguese after Karaliyadde lost the throne of Kandy (Strathern, 2007, pp. 211-212). She was raised as a Roman Catholic. The Portuguese tried to oust Vimaladharmasuriya, the reigning monarch of Kandy, and set her up as Kandy's Queen. By this time, Dona Catherina was just sixteen years old (Baldaeus, 1959, p. 68) and probably had no input on this decision. Indeed, the Dutch writer Philippus

19 Reverend Kotagama Wachissara in his doctoral thesis asserted that Dona Catherina's original name was Kusumasana Devi. Many historians including the co-author of this article have accepted this identification (De Silva 2024). However, it should be noted that Chiran Windsor, in a personal communication, has provided some evidence that Rev. Wachissara might have been mistaken.

Baldaeus recounts the story that when Dona Catherina took her seat in the palanquin designed to convey the princess, its bamboo pole snapped and that Dona Catherina exclaimed, "Wada! Forbear and remove me not thus, for it portends a great calamity" (Baldaeus, 1959, p. 18). Apparently it was the reassurances of Francisco de Silva Arcelaos, the Captain of Mannar who led the Portuguese force escorting her from her residence, who pointed out that Christians should not be moved by such fables and reassured her that God would protect her, that persuaded her to resume the journey after the palanquin was repaired (Baldaeus, 1959, p. 18). The Portuguese invading force was able to occupy Senkadagala, the capital city of Kandy, which they set on fire, and Dona Catherina was crowned Queen of Kandy in 1594. She evidently had no shortage of suitors as both Francisco de Silva Arcelaos, and Jayavira Bandara, the commander of the Sinhalese auxiliary forces, are mentioned as potential husbands (Baldaeus, 1959, pp. 17, 21). We do not know whether she preferred one over the other but when the Portuguese, suspecting Jayaweera Bandara of treachery put him to death, Baldaeus recounts that Dona Catherina was devastated by the killing. Saying that it would have been better to have tried or imprisoned him, she exclaimed,

> "Believe me that this deed of yours will be the cause of your own destruction, for all who hear the fact will not only hold you in abhorrence but become your enemies and repose no further confidence in you. Oh! To what extremes you have reduced me and caused so great a loss to your own King; be therefore on your guard for the result will tend to your cost, on account of your foolish deed, and the shameful manner in which you have rewarded the good services of King Janiere [Jayaweera] had rendered to you" (Baldaeus, 1959, p. 24).

Dona Catherina's assessment proved correct because local troops loyal to Jayaweera Bandara deserted the Portuguese and the Portuguese invading forces were soon defeated and Dona Catherina herself was captured by Vimaladharmasuriya who promptly married her as a means of strengthening his own claims to the throne. As Baldaeus reports, perhaps with some exaggeration, "the marriage was celebrated with great magnificence and rejoicing, the festivities were continued for 110 days at the expense of 5005 *pagodas*, besides that contributed by the inhabitants according to the usage of the country. Various were also the gifts made by the Emperor [Vimaladharmasuriya] to the inhabitants and many notabilities were promoted to offices of great honour as a reward for former services. He also made them grants of funds and manors the better to secure their goodwill. . ." (Baldaeus, 1959, p. 27). On the death of Vimaladharmasuriya in 1604, the king's brother Senarat who succeeded him also married Dona Catherina. Evidence suggests that Dona Catherina was an influential figure in Kandy. She could well have had to resist some pressure to become a Buddhist because a 1602 report by the Franciscans alleged that in respect of King Vimaladharmasuriya's prisoners, ". . .the king tried to tempt them

to apostasize and to abandon the Faith of Christ by making them many and large promises" (Perniola, 1989, p. 221). However, she clearly remained a Roman Catholic. Joris van Spilbergen, Dutch Envoy to Kandy in 1602, remarks that "Dona Catharina visits no pagodas" (Spilbergen, 1997, p. 44). She gave birth to five children - two daughters and three sons. Due to her influence, her children received instruction from Franciscan friars, Friar Joseph de N. Senhora and Friar Francisco Negrão. It was thus due to her influence that her son, Rajasinha II of Kandy (1635-87) was able to speak Portuguese, a facility that enabled him to deal directly with foreign envoys (De Silva, 2024, pp. 20, 24). The Kandyan Treaty with the Portuguese in 1617 indicates a continued Portuguese recognition of the claims of Dona Catherina and an acknowledgment of her importance, since it specifically states that Senarat is recognized as king of Kandy because he "is married to the Queen Dona Catarina, lawful queen of the realms of Kandy" (De Silva, 2009, p. 169). The 1633/34 Treaty, also agreed to by Senarat, reinforces this message by stating that the rights of the children of Senarat come, not from him, but from Dona Catherina - "the kingdom of Kandy is divided among three kings, sons of queen Dona Catherina, legitimate heiress of these kingdoms of Kandy" (De Silva, 2009, p. 158).

The only evidence that Dona Catherina was unhappy at some point in her marriage comes from the account of Baldeaus who reports that her son by Vimaladharmasuriya, Maha Astāna Adahasin died after an illness of six days and that there was suspicion that he was poisoned by his step-father, King Senarat who wanted to secure the throne for his own son, Kumārasinha. At the funeral on August 23rd 1604, Dona Catherina was distraught and "gave way to much lamentation on taking farewell of the deceased calling him her own flesh and blood, her vengeance for his death and wished to follow him to the grave by starving herself to death. Overwhelmed with intense grief, she sank into a fainting fit and was removed to another apartment" (Baldaeus, 1959, p. 58). If the assertion by historian Abeyasinghe that Dona Catherina sought to flee to the Portuguese and almost succeeded in doing so is accurate (Abeyasinghe, 1966, p. 52), this might have been the occasion when it happened. Senarat tried to persuade everyone that Maha Astana died of fever and gave him an elaborate funeral (Baldaeus, 1959, p. 58-60). It is possible that Dona Catherina eventually became convinced of the innocence of Senarat (if she had ever suspected him) because when she bore Senarat's youngest son, he was given the name Maha Astāna.

We have no conclusive evidence as to when Dona Catherina died. Baldaeus suggests that she died on July 20, 1613 when only thirty five years of age (Baldaeus, 1959, pp. 66-68) but the wording of the Treaty of 1617 which specifies that Senarat's claim to be king of Kandy is based on his marriage to Dona Catherina (De Silva, 2009, p. 169) suggests that she was still alive at that time. However, she is not mentioned in documents after 1617 that have survived and because she is not mentioned in

accounts of the division of Kandy into three principalities in 1621, it is possible that she had died by then. If so, she would have been only around forty years of age at death. While it is true that during her reign as Queen of Kandy, the authority of Dona Catherina was subordinate to that of her husbands' who were Kings of Kandy, her life provides us with evidence of the right of women to inherit power (De Silva, 2024).

The paucity of stories recorded by foreign writers about influential Sri Lankan women should not blind us to the limitations of the scope of influence of local women in sixteenth and seventeenth century Sri Lanka. Some of them were able to develop autonomous spheres of activity in specific domains but the prevalence of such limited agency should not obscure the asymmetry of power under which they operated in, both in respect of gender and of colonial dominance.

Conclusion

Returning to the general question of colonial representations of Sinhalese women, it is clear that partly due to the scarcity of documents and visual representations which have survived, there is only a modicum of evidence to perceive insights on Portuguese colonial views on Sinhalese women during the time of Portuguese colonial activity in the island in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This might be why modern historical writings on Portuguese views on those whom they encountered or subjugated pay minimal or no attention to women in Sri Lanka - or Ceilao as the Portuguese called the island (see Boxer, 1975; Sarmento, 2008; Vigas and Ehalt, 2024 and Hespanha, 2025). What evidence we can gather indicates that only a few of the Portuguese views were positive. Sinhalese women were seen as able to hold and inherit land and wield influence. However, the overall representation was negative. The achievements of the Sinhalas were attributed mostly to the men. Women were noticed mostly when they departed from the Western norms, for their polyandrous as well as polygamous marriages, and their dress or state of undress. The limitations of data illustrate the difficulty of writing a comprehensive history of a colonized group when the evidence is largely in writings and other materials produced by the colonizer. As Edward Said explained, we have to recognize that

> "...the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambiance of the representor. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is eo ipso implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven, with a great many other things besides the "truth" which is itself a representation" (Said, 1978, p. 272).

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare

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