

# Dutch Burghers and Portuguese Mechanics: Eurasian Ethnicity in Sri Lanka

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## I. PROLOGUE

Historians and anthropologists in Sri Lanka have tended to migrate in opposite directions, but away from the multiethnic confusion of the port cities. Typically, the heterogeneous, semi-Westernized, postcolonial urban society of Colombo and the larger towns has been only a transit point on intellectual journeys outbound to European archives or inbound to "traditional culture." This was certainly my viewpoint as I arrived "inbound" in Sri Lanka for my first anthropological fieldwork. I took only passing notice of the clerks of mixed European and Sri Lankan descent who sold me stationery supplies at Cargill's and mosquito nets at Carvalho's. These people are given the official designation of Burghers in the government census: they are the racially mixed descendants of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British personnel who occupied the island during four and a half centuries of colonial rule.

When I eventually arrived in Akkaraipattu, a predominantly Hindu and Muslim town on the east coast of the island, my indifference to Westernized elements became a calculated aversion, based on a desire to appear receptive to the indigenous culture. In particular, I decided to steer clear of the local Roman Catholics, many of whom were Burghers, dreading that I might become identified with the diocesan hierarchy, partially staffed by American Jesuits from New Orleans. Fortunately, I later met the parish priest, a Tamil named Father Raymond Arasaratnam, who was a whiz at electric circuitry and who also had considerable experience as an exorcist. It was through Father

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Raymond that I was introduced to the Burghers in the parish and to their senior member, Patrick Delima, the aging church sacristan.

At the time I became acquainted with this community, a heated contest of wills was already under way. It seems that during the annual celebration of the novenas, the old Burgher sacristan, following what he felt to be venerable church tradition, had set off an enormous string of firecrackers just as Father Raymond was elevating the consecrated Host. I later found there to be considerable local precedent for this sort of thing, but at the time, Father Raymond was incensed at the distraction. He stopped the service and publicly reprimanded the sacristan. Delima and his kinsmen were angered, because they were the official sponsors of that evening's novena and felt they had the right to display their piety with whatever detonations they liked. According to Father Raymond, they confronted him later that night at the parish house. The young Tamil priest took this as a test of his authority over the rowdy Burghers, and he pledged to deny them the sacraments until they delivered a public apology to him before the assembled congregation. The sacristan's faction immediately lodged an appeal with the Bishop of Trincomalee, and things settled into a flinty stalemate. Then, quite unexpectedly, in the church on All Souls Day, 1970, the old Burgher sacristan collapsed and died, and I was swept along to his funeral (which Father Raymond agreed to conduct). The sacristan's funeral attracted quite a large number of Burgher mourners from other towns, especially from Batticaloa, and the proceedings eventually became rather boozy. This exceptional religious exercise was what first prodded my awareness of the Burghers as an interesting and unique segment of the population.

In the literature on Sri Lanka, the Burghers are a familiar census category, yet they are scarcely known ethnographically. It has been a common practice in discussing the Burghers to distinguish between those of Dutch descent, the "Dutch Burghers," and those of Portuguese descent, the "Portuguese Burghers," or more derogatorily, the "Portuguese Mechanics." The Burghers as a whole have never exceeded 1 percent of the island's population, and the proportion of Burghers with fully documented Dutch pedigrees has always been a tiny fraction of that. Nevertheless, a stratum of successful middle-class Dutch Burghers has typically formed the most articulate segment of the Burgher community, seeking special recognition of their Dutch ancestry and, indirectly, special protection of their political and economic interests. The Portuguese are commonly depicted as the great Burgher residuum: poorer, darker, more numerous, and less European. All the Burghers are urbanites, but while the Dutch descendants are strongly represented in clerical work and the professions, the Portuguese are commonly associated with manual trades like blacksmithing, carpentry, and leather-work. Both the British colonial writers of the nineteenth century and the Dutch Burgher partisans of the early twentieth century emphasized a wide social, cultural, even racial, division

between these two categories of Burghers, and to a considerable extent this remains the conventional view of the Burghers today.

I, on the other hand, was introduced to the Burghers from the bottom of the status ladder rather than from the top, from the perspective of sleepy outstation society rather than from the vantage point of the Burgher elites in Colombo and Galle. From the point of view of my own fieldwork, a strict division between the Dutch and Portuguese Burghers was impossible to sustain; traces of Dutch and Portuguese identities were totally mixed and intertwined in all the Burghers I knew. It therefore remains to explore the wider extensions of the Burgher community in Sri Lanka to discover how Eurasian ethnicity appears at different levels of society. A brief historical review will serve to begin this task, for once bringing the attention of the anthropologist and the historian back to the intriguing social makeup of the colonial city.

## II. EURASIAN ORIGINS

### *Lusitanian Libido*

Prior to acquiring independent statehood in 1947, the island of Ceylon<sup>1</sup> had been partially or wholly administered by European colonial powers for 442 years, a political and economic hegemony exercised in three successive century-and-a-half phases by the Portuguese (1505-1658), the Dutch (1658-1796), and the British (1796-1947).<sup>2</sup> The Portuguese expansion around the African coast and into the Indian Ocean in the fifteenth century was carried out in the name of divinely sanctioned political and religious conquest, and Goa had been established as the permanent military and ecclesiastical capital of "Portuguese India" seven years before the first fortified Portuguese enclaves were established along the coast of Ceylon. There is no doubt that, from the outset, the Portuguese conquests in Africa, Brazil, and India were accompanied by widespread and frequent sexual relationships between Portuguese men and local women, causing a rapid growth of racially mixed populations in virtually every Portuguese settlement. As Charles Boxer has shown, however, such miscegenation did not necessarily reflect Portuguese racial tolerance or even-handedness toward new subjects of their king. The mixed (*mestiço*) populations in various Portuguese enclaves differed considerably, ranging from the semitribal *lançado* mulattos of Upper Guinea to the strongly Europeanized mulattos of São Tomé. Pure-blooded "blacks," either African or Asian, were clearly deemed inferior and were considered suitable for slavery, but mixed-blood offspring of Portuguese unions with blacks were given markedly higher status and greater responsibility in the colonial system. This was in part because the admixture of European blood was believed to

<sup>1</sup> Sri Lanka became the official name for Ceylon in 1972.

<sup>2</sup> The Kandyan kingdom, situated in the central highlands of the island, remained independent until 1815.

have elevated and improved the nature of these peoples, and in part because the mulattos were themselves inclined to share a European disdain for their native forebears. The basic European elements of society in all of the Portuguese colonies were, on the other hand, quite simple and uniform. There were really only three types of Portuguese: first, the *soldados*, soldiers who were by definition unmarried; second, the *casados*, or “married ones,” who were soldiers who had been discharged from the army and allowed to marry locally; and third, the *padres*, Catholic priests who were celibate. European women were totally absent.<sup>3</sup>

Aside from Catholic priests, most of the Portuguese who served in the African and Asian expeditions, including those who came to Ceylon, were exiles and criminals from the great Lisbon prison, the Limoeiro, whose sentences had been commuted to military service in the East.<sup>4</sup> Thus, despite the well-earned Portuguese reputation for extirpating heathen practices in Ceylon and elsewhere, there is strong evidence also to indicate that the rank and file of the Portuguese forces were scarcely committed to all the Catholic virtues, and least of all to the sacrament of matrimony. With reference to the report of a horrified Jesuit in Malabar who described the widespread fornication of Portuguese soldiers with their slave girls and with Hindu temple dancers, Boxer remarks, “there may have been some exaggeration in Padre Lancilotto's scandalized description of the excesses of the Lusitanian libido in sixteenth-century Asia, but there was not much.”<sup>5</sup>

During the period of Portuguese dominance in India and Ceylon, the local population was enumerated in as many as five separate categories, according to parentage and place of birth. The Jesuit Father Valignano, writing to his superiors in 1580, distinguished between European-born Portuguese, Indian-born Portuguese, *castiços* (offspring of a European father and a Eurasian mother), *mestiços* (offspring of a European father and a native mother), and natives.<sup>6</sup> Another common term for the mixed Portuguese descendants was *topass* (*topaz*, *tupass*, *toepas*, etcetera), which is derived etymologically from an Indian expression meaning “one who knows two languages.”<sup>7</sup> By the time the Dutch took over the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka, there were also a number of Portuguese and *topass* renegades employed as mercenaries by the

<sup>3</sup> Charles R. Boxer, *Race Relations in the Portuguese Colonial Empire, 1415-1825* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Charles R. Boxer, "An Introduction to Joao Ribeiro's 'Historical Tragedy of the Island of Ceylon' 1685," *Ceylon Historical Journal*. 3:3, 4 (1954), 247.

<sup>5</sup> Boxer, *Race Relations*, 61.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-63.

<sup>7</sup> The etymology of this word has generated much debate. See William Goonetilleke, "Dubash and Tuppahi," *Orientalist*, 3: (1888-89), 212-13; and R. C. Temple, "Topaz-Topass," *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*, 7:4, (1920), 210-17. For once, Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson* (reprint of 2d edition, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharial, 1968, pp. 933-34) is wrong.

Kandyan king, who at that time still jealously controlled the central highlands.<sup>8</sup> Despite the harshness of their religious policy, the Portuguese succeeded in establishing the Roman Catholic faith firmly in Ceylon, not only among their own racially mixed descendants, but among large numbers of the population who were once either Sinhalese Buddhists or Tamil Hindus.<sup>9</sup> The Portuguese also established a dialect of creole Portuguese in Ceylon as the lingua franca of government, commerce, and religion.

### *Dutch Domesticity*

While documents from the Portuguese period pertain chiefly to military and economic affairs,<sup>10</sup> records of the Dutch period afford considerably greater insight into the daily life of the European colonialists and of the natives and Eurasians in their employ. Nineteenth-century British colonial writers, in accounting for the demise of their predecessors in Ceylon, often emphasized the twin evils of Portuguese fanaticism and Dutch venality.<sup>11</sup> Actually, the Dutch had their share of bigotry, too, particularly against Catholics, but over the years, they became more pragmatic. The elements of colonial society in Ceylon under the Dutch were similar in many ways to those under the Portuguese, except that in place of the Portuguese military, the sole employer was now the United Netherlands East India Company (V.O.C.), and the administrative center was no longer Goa, but Batavia. Europeans were classified either as "servants of the Company" (i.e., soldiers or merchants), or as "free burghers" (*vrijburghers*), who were former servants of the company who had decided to marry locally and settle in the colony. Ministers of the Dutch Reformed Church were also present, their activities regulated, however, by the officials of the company. Once again, there were virtually no European women present, at least at the outset, and later efforts to bring women from Holland were never very successful. The vast majority of the free burghers who had left the company's service to settle locally found wives, not among the caste-conscious Sinhalese and Tamils, but among the existing population

<sup>8</sup> C. M. Fernando, "History of Ceylon," in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*, Arnold Wright, ed. (London: Lloyd's, 1907), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Today approximately 8 percent of Sri Lanka's population is Catholic.

<sup>10</sup> Chandra R. De Silva, *The Portuguese in Ceylon, 1617-1638* (Colombo: Cave, 1972);

George D. Winius, *The Fatal History of Portuguese Ceylon: Transition to Dutch Rule* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1971).

<sup>11</sup> In the words of the Reverend Robert Fellowes [Philatheles, pseud.], *The History of Ceylon from the Earliest Period to the Year 1815* (London: Joseph Mawman, 1817), quoted in William Knighton, *The History of Ceylon from the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longman, 1845), 300: "The Portuguese were under the influence of a system of bigotry, which, when it becomes a predominant feeling in the human breast, equally disregards the suggestions of caution, the admonitions of prudence, and the higher considerations of humanity. The Dutch did not bend down before the grim Moloch of religious bigotry, nor did they worship at the shrine of superstition, but cent. per cent. was their faith, gold was their object, and Mammon was their god. ..."

of mixed Portuguese who, according to Governor Ryklof Van Goens in 1663, were "swarming" in the port settlements of Galle and Colombo.<sup>12</sup>

Partisan authors in the British period, such as William Digby, tended to idealize the dignity and respectability of these early colonial Dutch Burghers, claiming that "the intercourse of the Dutch in Ceylon with the natives was purer and infinitely higher than had been that of their predecessors."<sup>13</sup> The historical truth of the matter is that Jan Thijssen, who was supervising the burgeoning interests of the V.O.C. in Ceylon during the final stages of the Portuguese debacle, was instructed from Batavia as early as 1641 to halt the notorious immorality of the Dutch on the island. He issued an ordinance instructing all servants of the company to give up their local women, or to marry them, on the stipulation that they settle and remain in the Indies as long as their wives were living.<sup>14</sup>

Within the general category of "the Dutch" (*Hollandsche*) in Ceylon, distinctions came to be made between the Europeans born in Europe, the Europeans born in Ceylon, and the *mixties*, offspring of a European father and either a native or a *mestiça* mother, but the latter group was always far and away the largest. Meanwhile, the *topasses*, or Portuguese *mestiço* men, were employed by the Dutch as troops and minor employees of the company. The Dutch colonial enterprise in Ceylon was also dependent upon the use of domestic slaves brought in chiefly from East Africa and from southern India, all of whom knew, or quickly learned, the Creole Portuguese lingua franca.<sup>15</sup>

For a period in the latter part of the seventeenth century, the Dutch company promoted a scheme to build up prosperous settlements of free burghers in the major Dutch enclaves in Ceylon, with the aim of providing a permanent and cheap source of military manpower in case of need.<sup>16</sup> With few exceptions, however, the directors of the company were disappointed by the lack of enterprise shown by these burghers and by their tendency to drink. If the

<sup>12</sup> Paulus Edward Pieris, ed., *Some Documents Relating to the Rise of the Dutch Power in Ceylon, 1602-1670, from the Translations at the India Office* (Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries, 1929), 280. In fact, one of the conditions imposed at the time of the Portuguese surrender was that widows and unmarried daughters of the Portuguese were to remain in the colony as wives of Dutch personnel, and these women were all either natives or mixed-bloods. See F. H. De Vos, "Dutch Colonisation of the East," *Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon* (hereafter *JDBUC*). 12:1-4 (1920), 2.

<sup>13</sup> William Digby, "The Eurasians of Ceylon," *Calcutta Review*, 63:125, (1876), 178.

<sup>14</sup> K. W. Goonewardena, *The Foundations of Dutch Power in Ceylon, 1638-1658* (Amsterdam: Djambatan, 1958), 210.

<sup>15</sup> R. G. Anthonisz, "Lansi," *JDBUC*, 14:3 (1925), 87; *idem*, "The Dutch in Ceylon: Glimpses of Their Life and Times," *JDBUC*, 24:3 (1935), 87-92; *JDBUC*, 24:4 (1935), 129-32; *JDBUC*, 25:1 (1935), 6-14; *JDBUC*, 25:2 (1935), 63-71; J. R. Toussaint, "The Burghers in Early British Times," *JDBUC*, 25:2 (1935), 41-55.

<sup>16</sup> K. W. Goonewardena, "A New Netherlands in Ceylon: Dutch Attempts to Found a Colony during the First Quarter Century of their Power in Ceylon," *Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, 2:2 (1959), 203-44.

historical sources suggest a caricature of the Portuguese *casado* as a cruel bigoted sensualist, the same sources parody the Dutch *vrijburger* as a lazy incompetent drunkard. Perhaps understandably, a degree of unfaithfulness is reported among their native and *mestiça* wives. Despite a variety of lucrative trading monopolies offered to them by the company, the Dutch colonists seem to have done best as landlords, tavern keepers, and casino operators.<sup>17</sup>

Although the Dutch language was the medium of communication for official purposes, creole Portuguese was the language of the Dutch *vrijburger* home and of the marketplace throughout the Dutch period. Even diplomatic exchanges with the Kandyan court were conducted in creole Portuguese, which was widely spoken among leading personages in the Sinhalese and Tamil districts. Dutch children learned creole Portuguese from their Portuguese *mestiça* mothers and from the slave women who were their nurses, some of them Kaffirs from Portuguese East Africa.<sup>18</sup> Within the Dutch colonial society in the island, some families were certainly members of a more “Dutchified” civil elite, but the general evidence reveals widespread Portuguese and Sinhalese/Tamil cultural influences and interesting multiethnic domestic arrangements throughout the period. A glimpse of this is conveyed in the journal of Christopher Schweitzer, a German employee of the V.O.C. in 1680:

[I knew a] Widow, by name *Branco de Costa*, whose Father had been a Portuguese and her Mother a Cingulayan, and by whom I took my Diet. She thought I had some Affection for her, and I left her to believe it: I paid her 2 Rixdollars by the Month, and had a very good Table, and what Beer or *Suri* I pleas'd at Meals. Her first Husband was a substantial Free Merchant at Columbo, call'd Jan Christiansen ... [who was lost at sea]. Although he had taken a considerable amount with him, yet she was left worth over twenty thousand Ducats, and twenty Slaves from Bengal which she used very inhumanly with Blows and Whippings. But I could not marry her, not for her being Black, but that her Ears, although they were richly set out with Gold, were very large and a Span long, and that her Hair, that would reach down to her Heels, she would besmear with Oyl made of Coco-Nuts ev'ry Day and then wind it up on her Head, just as we serve horses in Germany which have long Tails. She wore a little Wastcoat of very fine Linnen and fastened with Gold Buttons, through which her Black Skin was well to be seen; from the Breast down to her Navel a Span broad she was Naked. From beneath the Naval downwards she had a white Linnen Garment down to the Feet, and another above this of beautiful coloured Silk, wrapped around her: She had a great Rosary round her Neck made of Gold and Ivory. She spoke no Dutch, but Portuguese and Cingulaish, which were her Father's and Mother's Languages, also Malabarish and Maldivian. ... I dieted all this time with my aforementioned long-ear'd Widow,

<sup>17</sup> Sinnappa Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power in Ceylon, 1658-1687* (Amsterdam: Djambatan, 1958), 197-206; Jacob G. Haafner, *Travels on Foot through the Island of Ceylon* (London: Sir Richard Phillips, 1821), 83.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Russell Smith, “Sri Lanka Creole Portuguese Phonology,” (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1977), ch. 1. The dissertation is also published in *International Journal of Dravidian Linguistics*. 7:2 (1978), 248-405.

and so continued a whole year. She asked me often why I would not marry: I told her I would have her if she would leave off Oyling her Hair, and let her Ears be clipt into shape; at which she shook her Head and said that she would die first.<sup>19</sup>

From an anthropological perspective, the career of Branco de Costa would seem to attest to considerable intercultural creativity and vitality in seventeenth and eighteenth century Sri Lanka. Yet, despite this, as well as the service rendered by some exemplary colonial officials toward the end of the period, the decline of Dutch power in Ceylon has been viewed by most historians as stemming from quite the opposite state of affairs: a pervasive deterioration in morale, enterprise, and ethical standards among all the Dutch descendants on the island.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Burghers and the British*

England snatched control of the island from Holland in 1796. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Reverend James Cordiner, chaplain of the Colombo garrison, estimated the total population of “Dutch inhabitants” in Ceylon at 900 and of “Portuguese” at 5,000. This reckoning at least indicates the disproportion in size of the two groups, despite the possibility of some confusion involving Low Country Sinhalese bearing Portuguese surnames. Many of the officials of the former Dutch colonial establishment chose to remain in Ceylon rather than face an uncertain future in Batavia, and they, together with many of the mixed Dutch descendants, were soon recruited by the British authorities to staff the legal and clerical services of the new colonial administration, thus redeeming them from what Cordiner saw as “conditions of great indigence” brought on by the Dutch capitulation.<sup>21</sup> Under the British, the term *Burgher* was eventually applied to all the mixed European inhabitants of Ceylon, and with the encouragement of certain high officials, such as Sir Alexander Johnston, numbers of them rose to positions of responsibility and prominence in government and the professions. The greatest number, however, served in

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Schweitzer, "Journal and Diary," in *Germans in Dutch Ceylon*, Roland Raven-Hart, ed. and trans. (Colombo: National Museums of Ceylon Translation Series, 1953), I, 74-76. Schweitzer was not kidding about ear-jobs: he reports that a baptized Jew named Moritz persuaded his Sinhalese mistress to have her carefully elongated earlobes clipped, and that he married her shortly thereafter.

<sup>20</sup> Probably no one has stated this case with more apocalyptic gusto than Colvin R. De Silva, in his *Ceylon under the British Occupation, 1795-1833*, 3d ed. (Colombo: Colombo Apothecaries, 1953), I, 14. “A society permeated by Portuguese influences produced no healthy public opinion, and an underpaid officialdom which had become lethargic and corrupt displayed no vigorous public spirit.... The system of pay encouraged peculation and private trade; the recruits from Holland were of the wrong type, nepotism and favouritism were rife; and the Burgher in Ceylon, condemned to permanent exile, succumbed to greed and degenerated in the adulatory atmosphere of a slave-ridden home.”

<sup>21</sup> James Cordiner, *A Description of Ceylon* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, & Orme, 1807), I, 87-89.



the clerical services, which they dominated, in the transportation and communication services, and in various technical departments. Most of these were Dutch Burghers, that is, members of a middle-class community claiming mixed Dutch descent to be found in the larger towns, who were quick to press for, and seize upon, educational opportunities under the British.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the visibility and success of the middle-class Dutch Burghers in nineteenth century Ceylon, there was no overwhelming British sympathy for their cause, and there was even less tolerance shown toward the large number of poorer, darker, and more benighted Portuguese descendants. In addition to serving in the *burgerij*, or reserve militia, the mixed Portuguese inhabitants of the towns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had taken up a range of petty trades and crafts, such as carpentry, smithing, tailoring, and shoemaking. This sometimes led the Dutch to call them *ambachtslieden*, or handicraftsmen, a designation later translated by the British as “mechanics” and popularly so used as an ethnic label for the Portuguese Burghers throughout most of the British period. While all mixed European descendants were enumerated as Burghers for census and administrative purposes, the existence of a deep social division between the Dutch Burghers and the Portuguese Mechanics was attested by many colonial observers. Most of the descriptive writers on Ceylon in the nineteenth century mention the Burghers and, although these authors endlessly cribbed material from one another, a comparison of their remarks provides a vivid mosaic of stereotypes.

The Reverend Cordiner's was one of the earliest, perhaps the briefest, and certainly the most temperate account of the Dutch Burghers living in Colombo. They were thrifty and hardworking, he said, and as straitened proprietors of lodgings rented to the British, they maintained “an appearance, in the eyes of the world, sometimes affluent and gay, always decent and respectable.”<sup>23</sup> A thoroughly hostile, but much more interesting, description of daily routine among Dutch Burgher men was first published in 1803 by Captain Robert Percival: “The chief trait of the original Dutch character, which these [Burghers] in Ceylon retain, is their fondness for gin and tobacco: in other respects they adopt the customs and listless habits of the country.” And the Dutch Burgher women, continued Percival, were far worse. Briefly pretty in their youth, they soon lapsed into slovenly and indolent habits, dependent upon their retinues of slave girls. They loved to dress up in bright finery for parties and dances, but the reality of their daily life centered upon soaking

<sup>22</sup> Their counterparts, the Anglo-Indians of India, fared worse, being excluded from education and employment after the 1780s out of fear of their possible mixed allegiance, and regaining favor only after they proved their loyalty in the Mutiny of 1857. See Allen D. Grimshaw, “The Anglo-Indian Community: The Integration of a Marginal Group,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 18:2 (1959), 227-40; and Noel P. Gist and Roy Dean Wright, *Marginality and Identity: Anglo-Indians as a Racially Mixed Minority in India* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973).

<sup>23</sup> Cordiner, *Description*, 87.

their hair with fetid coconut oil, expectorating betel juice, and gossiping in “barbarous Portuguese.”<sup>24</sup>

Most later writers portrayed the Dutch Burghers in a moderately kinder light, and by the middle of the century the vital service of the Dutch Burghers in the colonial administrative system had become too valuable to ignore.<sup>25</sup> In 1859 Sir Emerson Tennent noted that the Dutch Burghers “form essentially the middle class in all the towns in Ceylon” and that “they fill places of trust in every administrative establishment from the department of the Colonial Secretary to the humblest police court.”<sup>26</sup> Finally, in the 1870s, the newspaperman William Digby advocated granting the Dutch Burghers greater responsibility in the colonial system.<sup>27</sup> In Digby's view, they were “a civilizing, leavening influence” in colonial society, acting as cultural brokers and European role-models for the benighted Sinhalese and Tamil peasantry: “To the native sensible of and desirous for advancement,—social and political, the remark may be made, 'The Burghers ye have always with you: in and through and with them ye may walk forward.'”<sup>28</sup> Yet, although portraying the Burgher as a very law-abiding citizen, Digby added, quite cautiously, “there is a virulent side to the Burgher character, it must be confessed, which finds vent in the use of foul words expressed in a Portuguese *patois*, and sometimes in anonymous letters.” Still, the only major problem according to Digby was the shortcoming in stability and perseverance among the Burghers, aggravated here and there by “continued and everyday moderate tipping.”<sup>29</sup>

Such gentle reproach was rarely bestowed upon the Portuguese Mechanics, who were described in most nineteenth-century accounts as dissolute, degraded, and perennially drunk. Percival complimented the talent of the Mechanic artisans, “who surpass[ed] all the rest in the beauty and dexterity of their workmanship,” but as a group, he found them “lazy, treacherous, effeminate, and passionate to excess.”<sup>30</sup> The abuse heaped upon the Mechanics in most of the published sources of the period was quite intemperate, and much of the criticism reflected a prevailing repugnance toward racial or cultural hybridization. The Dutch Burghers, with their bureaucratic jobs,

<sup>24</sup> Robert Percival, *An Account of the Island of Ceylon*, 2nd ed. (London: C. & R. Baldwin, 1805), 158-65.

<sup>25</sup> James Selkirk, *Recollections of Ceylon* (London: J. Hatchard & Son, 1844), 72; Charles Pridham, *An Historical, Political, and Statistical Account of Ceylon and Its Dependencies* (London: T. & W. Boone, 1849), I, 480-82.

<sup>26</sup> James Emerson Tennent, *Ceylon: An Account of the Island*, 3d ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1859), II, 156.

<sup>27</sup> William Digby, “The Eurasians of Ceylon,” *Calcutta Review*, 63:125 (1876), 173-206; *idem*, “Eurasians as Leaven in India and Ceylon,” *Calcutta Review*, 64:127 (1877), 180-208; *idem*, “The Burgher Community,” in *Forty Years of Official and Unofficial Life in an Oriental Crown Colony* (Madras: Higginbotham; London: Longmans, Green, 1879), I, 1-65.

<sup>28</sup> Digby, “Eurasians of Ceylon,” 188, 192.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 185; Digby, *Forty Years*, 54.

<sup>30</sup> Percival, *Account*, 73, 167.

their generally lighter complexions, and their cultivation of English manners, were making a strong show of being Europeans, but the Portuguese Mechanics were visibly more “mixed” in every respect. Racially, “completely degenerated,” charged Cordiner in 1807, they exhibited “complexions of a blacker hue than any of the original natives.”<sup>31</sup>

Evidently the worst type of vilification<sup>32</sup> was reserved for the Portuguese Mechanics, who, in the face of Dutch Burgher respectability, were made to justify a wide spectrum of displaced British prejudices. Paradoxically, the Portuguese Mechanics were said to exhibit the worst effects of miscegenation, leaving them darker, weaker, more indolent, and less trustworthy than any of the European or native races, while at the same time (since no one wished to exonerate their Portuguese forebears) they were accused of retaining the excessive pride, strength, aggressiveness, and libido of the Lusitanian racial stock. They were recognized to have a certain flair for music, dancing, revelry, and bright costumes, although these were scarcely seen as redeeming virtues. Their creole Portuguese language was said to be an ungrammatical mishmash of words which, awkwardly enough, retained its usefulness despite the advance of English. Although skillful in their chosen trades, said Digby, “no Portuguese Burgher has yet risen to anything beyond a master tailor.”<sup>33</sup>

What is most remarkable about attitudes toward the Portuguese Mechanics, however, is the utter deprecation of their mixed European origins and their mixed European practices. “They are the most anomalous people in the island,” said the Reverend James Selkirk, whose comment sums up the perplexed colonial view.<sup>34</sup> They could not easily be assigned to one of the “native races,” yet they also violated the prevailing social classifications within the stratified European colonial establishment. Even so. Burghers were occasionally thrown into memorable contact with Europeans. After disembarking at Galle in the 1870s, the Amazonian explorer, Henry Bates, took the overnight Royal Victoria Mailcoach up the coast road to Colombo under monsoon conditions, wedged painfully into his seat by the unyielding corpulence of a stolid and cold-eyed Dutch Burgher matron, while the inebriated driver, a Portuguese Mechanic, groped for the road, “indulging himself in a

<sup>31</sup> Cordiner, *Description*, 88. A more complete theory of racial contamination and degeneration is expounded by Major Jonathan Forbes in his *Eleven Years in Ceylon* (London: Richard Bentley, 1840), II, 162-163. “They are seen of every shade, from deadly white to burnished black: those who are of Cingalese blood, free from exotic mixture, have the most pleasing colour; while the slightest mixture of native blood with European can never be eradicated and in some cases seems to go on darkening in each succeeding generation, until, as in many of the Portuguese descendants, we find European features with jet-black complexions. The Dutch descendants, with native blood, are now undergoing the blackening process, although in general they have only reached as far as a dark and dingy yellow.”

<sup>32</sup> For example. Henry C. Sirr, *Ceylon and the Cingalese* (London: William Shoberi, 1850), II, 40, quoted in Digby, “Eurasians of Ceylon,” 182.

<sup>33</sup> Digby, “Eurasians of Ceylon,” 183.

<sup>34</sup> Selkirk, *Recollections*, 70.

glass of strong waters at the end of each stage.”<sup>35</sup> The episode encapsulates many of the contrasting Burgher stereotypes of the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

### III. MOBILIZING AN ETHNIC IDENTITY

#### *The Dutch Burgher Union*

It had become an unofficial but accepted practice during the nineteenth century for one seat on the Governor's Legislative Council to be reserved for a Burgher representative, drawn invariably from the Dutch Burgher civic elite of Colombo and Galle. However, during the period of deliberations leading to the constitutional reforms of 1910, it became evident that ethnic representation on the Legislative Council would soon become a matter of democratic choice within officially demarcated communal (i.e., ethnically defined) electorates. As the British had never upheld an official distinction between Dutch Burghers and Portuguese Burghers, the presence of the new “Burgher” constituency posed the possibility that the large lower-class Portuguese component might come to outpoll the less numerous, wealthier, and better-educated Dutch Burghers in the electorate. Leading members of the Dutch Burgher community lobbied vigorously for a more restricted electorate, to be comprised solely of Dutch Burghers, who, it was said, were the only true Burghers in the island. This request was denied, and from that point onward, as

<sup>35</sup> Henry W. Bates, "Four Months in Ceylon," in his *Illustrated Travels: A Record of Discovery, Geography, and Adventure* (London & New York: Cassell, Petter, & Galpin, 1869-1875), IV, 366-67.

<sup>36</sup> An early British poetic account of the island reviles first the wasted Portuguese:

Here from this elevated ground  
I view the Pettah, stretching round!  
With every narrow lane and street,  
Where men of many nations meet,  
Moormen, Gentoos, and Cingalese,  
Mix'd with those mongrel Portuguese,  
Who boast indeed the Lusian name,  
But recreant to their fathers' fame;  
Their torpid breasts no virtue fires,  
Degenerate sons of valiant sires!

And then lauds the phlegmatic but virtuous Dutch:

Those houses closely wedged in rows,  
Where faint and weak the sea-breeze blows,  
And heat reflected doubly glows,  
While clouds of smoke from every room,  
The stiffening atmosphere perfume,  
The Hollanders' abodes declare,  
Those sons of patience, thrift, and care!

From Thomas Ajax Anderson, *The Wanderer in Ceylon: A Poem in Three Cantos* (London: T. Egerton, 1819), quoted in J. R. Toussaint, "Ceylon's Soldier Poet," *JDBUC*, 27:1 (1937), 22-23.

Tissa Fernando has shown, the political and economic privileges of the Dutch Burghers were steadily eroded by the democratic reforms and nationalist movements which led to independence in 1947.<sup>37</sup>

Although the English language and way of life became the model for aspiring Burgher families in the nineteenth century, this group was never permitted to share the status and identity of the British. Therefore, the growing pressure for Sinhalese, Tamil, and Moorish ethnic quotas in government and the professions toward the end of the century prompted a movement to promote and defend a distinctively Dutch ethnic identity among the middle-class Burghers of Colombo, many of whom sensed a threat to their position in education and government service. An early literary and cultural circle called *Het Hollandsch Gezelschap van Ceylon*—The Dutch Association of Ceylon—lasted a few years in the 1890s, but it was the founding of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon (DBUC) in 1908 that gave the most effective publicity and organization to the Dutch Burgher cause. The chief objectives of the DBUC, as promulgated in its constitution, were to promote the welfare of Dutch Burghers, to inculcate values of thrift and self-reliance, to dispense assistance to needy members, to foster fellowship, to revive Dutch customs and language among the membership, to maintain a library, to read and publish papers on Dutch Burgher history, and to publish the genealogies of Dutch Burgher families living in Ceylon.<sup>38</sup> The *Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon (JDBUC)*, which has been published since 1908, contains scholarly articles, patrilineal Dutch genealogies, notes and queries, and reports of the internal affairs of the DBUC.

However, the social and cultural aims of the DBUC were indeed linked to implicit political goals and, mindful of the prevailing popular ideologies regarding Sinhalese, Tamil, and Moorish “racial” categories, these goals were pursued through a claim to a distinctive northern European racial identity. From the outset, membership in the DBUC was governed by a strict genealogical qualification: members had to demonstrate an uninterrupted line of patrilineal descent from one or more European employees of the United Netherlands East India Company in Ceylon, the only permitted exception being genealogical links through the marriage of Dutch Burgher women to modern European men of any nationality.<sup>39</sup> The authority for this rule was derived from the testimony of an eminent Burgher, Sir Richard Ottley, who in 1830 asserted: “If the right to be denominated a Burgher be once lost by the

<sup>37</sup> Tissa Fernando, “The Burghers of Ceylon,” in *The Blending of Races: Marginality and Identity in World Perspective*, Noel P. Gist and Anthony Gary Dworkin, eds. (New York: John Wiley, 1972), 61-78.

<sup>38</sup> “The Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon,” *JDBUC*, 1:1 (1908), 1-11; “The Constitution and By-laws of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon,” *JDBUC*, 1:1 (1908), 52-60; “Proceedings of a Special General Meeting, 18 January 1919,” *JDBUC*, 11:3-4 (1918), 72-76.

<sup>39</sup> “Constitution,” 53.

legitimate father being a Cingalese or other Indian, it cannot be recovered.”<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, it was argued that this patrilineal rule had been the very criterion used by the Dutch colonialists themselves in determining which inhabitants should be classified as *Hollandsche*, a contention supported by an optimistic and rather literal reading of the definition of a Dutch *mixtie*, i.e., the offspring of a European father and a native or racially mixed mother.<sup>41</sup>

According to the DBUC's renowned genealogist, F. H. De Vos, “the test of a man's race is that of his earliest known ancestor in the direct male line of legitimate descent... A wife or child follows the racial status of her husband or father, a bastard that of his mother.”<sup>42</sup> No doubt the bastards uppermost in his mind were those born prior to 1658, when the last Portuguese enclave capitulated to the Dutch. A further implication of this doctrine was not realized until 1939, when the rules of the DBUC were formally amended so as to expel any Dutch Burgher woman member who married a man unqualified for membership in the DBUC.<sup>43</sup> This caste-like solicitude for the endogamy of Dutch Burgher women was chiefly focused on the threat of low-status out-marriage, whereas the prospect of producing (or discovering) new members through hypergamous unions with European men had always been warmly applauded. The search for European ancestry in the maternal line of descent was not totally overlooked by the Dutch Burgher historians, who gleefully adduced every shred of proof that a few European women had actually married and settled in Ceylon during the Dutch period. For the most part, however, a boast of European pedigree on the maternal side meant elevating the disdained Portuguese *topasses* and the Sinhalese into “the same great Aryan family” as the Dutch,<sup>44</sup> sentiments largely at variance with the exclusive principles of the DBUC. Although it sounds odd coming from the leader of a Eurasian organization. President R. G. Anthonisz's tenth anniversary address reminded members that the cause of the Dutch Burghers was threatened by many inimical forces “and not the least by some modern advocates of the 'fusion of races.’”<sup>45</sup>

In addition to proving their “Dutchness,” the Burghers felt it necessary to vindicate their exclusive claim to the title “Burgher.” During the Dutch period, European servants of the V.O.C. were permitted to resign their com-

<sup>40</sup> Sir Richard Ottley's testimony before the Commission of Eastern Inquiry, 1830, quoted in Ponnambalam Arunachalam, "Population," in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*, Arnold Wright, ed. (London: Lloyds, 1907), 343.

<sup>41</sup> R. G. Anthonisz, "Lansi," *JDBUC*, 14:3 (1925), 78; *idem*, "A Hundred Years Ago," *JDBUC*, 14:4 (1925), 102-3; *idem*, "The Burghers of Ceylon," *JDBUC*, 17:1 (1927), 5.

<sup>42</sup> DeVos, "Dutch Colonisation," 4.

<sup>43</sup> "Proceedings of the Special General Meeting, 18 August 1939," *JDBUC*, 29:2 (1939), 77-79.

<sup>44</sup> "The Burghers of Ceylon: A Flash-back," *JDBUC*, 47:1 (1957), 26 [reprint of a 1903 Colombo newspaper article]; De Vos, "Dutch Colonisation," 2.

<sup>45</sup> R. G. Anthonisz in "Proceedings of the Annual General Meeting, 23 February 1918," *JDBUC*, 11:1-2(1918), 4.

pany posts, marry, and settle in the towns as free burghers or *vrijburger*. Their wives were admittedly drawn from the mixed Portuguese *topass* population living at the margins of the Dutch settlements, but the *topass* men, it was argued by partisans of the DBUC, never gained the status of free burghers. Later the British blurred this distinction when they applied the single term "Burgher" to all mixed European inhabitants of Ceylon. In colloquial Sinhalese speech, however, a distinction between the Dutch descendants (Sinhalese *lansi*, from *hollandsche*) and the Portuguese descendants (Sinhalese *tuppahi*, cognate to Indo-Portuguese *topass*) always remained. The so-called Portuguese Burghers, it was argued, represented an amalgamation of the *topass* population with the liberated Dutch slaves and had nothing in common with the Dutch Burghers.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, as historians of the DBUC themselves eventually had to admit, the Dutch colonial government of Ceylon in the eighteenth century pragmatically issued certificates of burghership to many non-Dutch inhabitants of the towns.<sup>47</sup> The principal obligation accompanying burghership was enlistment in the reserve militia, or *burgerij*, a duty which was eventually imposed on "all persons whatsoever who are not in the actual service of the Company but are Christians and also wear European dress."<sup>48</sup> There is evidence that the category of "free burghers" became increasingly diverse in the later years of Dutch rule. For example, it has been noted that an act of burghership was bestowed in 1759 upon a man named Andries de Waas, "of the fisher caste, who had earnestly applied to be recognized as a Burgher."<sup>49</sup> Further evidence of this is found in the effusive letter of appreciation presented by "the Dutch inhabitants and Burghers of Colombo" to Sir Alexander Johnston in 1817, to which are appended a number of conspicuously Portuguese names whose provenance has been a source of discomfort to DBUC historians.<sup>50</sup>

### *The Portuguese Cultural Substratum*

Anxious to promote the revival of Dutch language and national customs among the Dutch Burghers, the founders of the DBUC made a start by enlisting a visiting Dutch journalist to play Sinterklaas at an authentic celebration of St. Nikolaas Eve in 1907. By then, however, the Dutch language was hopelessly defunct in Ceylon. The motto of the V.O.C.—*Eendracht Maacht*

<sup>46</sup> Anthonisz, "Lansi," 87-89; "Dutch in Ceylon," *JDBUC*, 24:4 (1935), 129-132; G. V. Grenier, "Earlier Colonisation and Later Developments," *JDBUC*, 50:3-4(1960), 103-8. There are also parallels here with the Anglo-Indians of the subcontinent, whose largest organization refuses to admit the Indo-Portuguese "Feringhees" of the Malabar Coast (Gist and Wright, *Marginality and Identity*, 97-98).

<sup>47</sup> G. V. Grenier, "The Union: Are We Fulfilling Its Objectives?" *JDBUC*, 48:1 (1958), 16.

<sup>48</sup> G. V. Grenier, "'Burgher' Etymology and Some Relevant Reflections," *JDBUC*, 56:1-4 (1966), 26.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> "Johnston Manuscripts," *JDBUC*, 47:2-3 (1957), 33-42.

*Macht, Unity Brings Strength*—was adopted by the DBUC, and a Burgher anthem—*Het Lieve Vaderland, The Beloved Fatherland*—was sung at meetings, but all business was transacted, and all contributions to the pages of the *JDBUC* were published, in English. The search for Dutch customs in the island was taken up enthusiastically in the pages of the *JDBUC* and other antiquarian journals, but the findings were typically modest: a remnant of Dutch wedding “coronets” (*kroontje*) in Jaffna, a brisk trade in “iron-cookies” (*ijzer koekjes*) in the streets of Galle, and various lexical contributions to the native languages (including the names of the suits of playing cards in Sinhalese).<sup>51</sup>

The political importance of conspicuously celebrating distinctive Dutch holidays and domestic customs in the prevailing milieu of competitive ethnic politics was felt by the founders to be a major justification for the existence of the DBUC. At the tenth Annual General Meeting, held in 1918, President Anthonisz noted with almost Marxist insight that the Union “has made the members of the Community realize what they were in fact losing sight of, viz. that they belong by origin and descent to a distinct and well defined class, with traditions which it is to their advantage to maintain....”<sup>52</sup> Yet, what the Dutch Burgher historians and antiquarians discovered, and to their credit acknowledged, was that many of their most characteristic traditions were not Dutch at all, but Portuguese, and that other practices had been borrowed from the Sinhalese and Tamils.

The creole Portuguese language had remained the medium of internal diplomacy, petty trade, and informal sociability throughout the Dutch period. Even Dutch marriage ceremonies were conducted in creole Portuguese, commonly the language of the bride.<sup>53</sup> Making the best of this anomaly, Dutch Burgher historians have taken pride in the claim that by the end of the seventeenth century the best Portuguese in the Dutch Indies was that spoken in Ceylon.<sup>54</sup> The Dutch language was not encouraged by the British, and it quickly fell into disuse under the competitive pressure of English. Creole Portuguese, on the other hand, remained as the urban dialect of all the Burghers, permitting Tennent to say in 1859 that “a corrupted Portuguese is to the present day the vernacular of the middle classes in every town of impor-

<sup>51</sup> Robert J. Pereira, “The ‘Koronchi’ Ceremony,” *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*, 8:2 (1922), 155-56; Louis Nell, “The Archaeology of Ceylon Eurasian Gastronomy,” *Orientalist*, 3 (1888-89), 167; Alfred E. Buultjens, “On Some Dutch Words Commonly Used by the Sinhalese,” *Orientalist*, 3 (1888-89), 104-7 [reprint in *JDBUC*, 19:1-2 (1929), 96-101]. A survey of other legacies, including Ceylon Dutch civil engineering, architecture, furniture, law, land administration, and archival resources, is contained in Richard L. Brohier, *Links between Sri Lanka and The Netherlands: A Book of Dutch Ceylon* (Colombo: The Netherlands Alumni Association of Sri Lanka, 1978).

<sup>52</sup> Anthonisz, “Proceedings of 23 February 1918,” 4.

<sup>53</sup> Schweitzer, “Journal and Diary,” 76.

<sup>54</sup> De Vos, “Dutch Colonisation,” 1.



tance.”<sup>55</sup> Revealingly, a nineteenth-century Dutch Burgher family recordbook (*stamboek*) first lists the circumstances of a daughter's illness and death in Dutch prose, then records the last conversation between father and daughter in Creole Portuguese.<sup>56</sup> Ian Smith has traced the tenacious history of Creole Portuguese in Ceylon up to the present day, noting that pockets of native Creole speakers still exist in many of the lesser towns.<sup>57</sup>

The Portuguese influence on Ceylon has also been strong in religion and music, while the Dutch had little enduring impact in these fields. Catholicism was the faith of the Portuguese *mestiça* women taken as wives by the colonial Dutch townsmen, and there has always been a deep current of Catholicism in the lower classes of the Burgher community. The musical flair of the Portuguese Mechanics was recognized even in the prejudiced accounts of the nineteenth-century writers, while such love of song and dance was generally portrayed as beneath the dignity of the respectable Dutch Burgher bureaucrats. Yet, the twentieth-century reminiscences of some Dutch Burgher writers express nostalgia for those Saturday night *strom-strom* parties, where guests danced the *kafferina* and the *chikotti* to the accompaniment of the *viaule*, *bandarinha*, violin, and tambourine and became progressively saturated with a local arrack punch called “the Gloria.”<sup>58</sup> Today's popular *baila* steps represent a Sinhalese transmutation of this Portuguese dance tradition, but there are places, particularly in the Eastern Province, where creole-speaking Burghers retain Portuguese tunes and ballad fragments from the sixteenth century.<sup>59</sup>

Accounts of Dutch Burgher domestic and ceremonial customs in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are disappointingly meager, but they at least suggest an interesting mixture of Dutch, Portuguese, and Sri Lankan traditions. Childbirth was accompanied by the beating of a copper pan to drown out the cries of the newborn, lest unfriendly spirits be attracted. The infant is said to have been traditionally fumigated for several weeks with “incense of Benjamin” consecrated by a Catholic priest, but the same source also men-

<sup>55</sup> Tennent, *Ceylon*, II, 70.

<sup>56</sup> R. G. Anthonisz, "The Disuse of the Dutch Language in Ceylon," *JDBUC*, 1:1 (1908), 35.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, "Sri Lankan Creole Portuguese Phonology," ch. 1. See also D. E. Hettiaratchi, "Linguistics in Ceylon, I.," in *Linguistics in South Asia*, Thomas A. Sebeok, ed., Vol. V of *Current Trends in Linguistics* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1969), 747-48.

<sup>58</sup> Rip Van Winkle [pseud.], "An Afterword on 'Some Exquisite Nonsense,'" *JDBUC*, 18:4 (1929), 184-86. See also C. M. Fernando, "The Music of Ceylon, I. The Music of the Mechanics of Ceylon," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch*, 13:45 (1894), 183-89; and Caroline Corner, *Ceylon, the Paradise of Adam: The Record of Seven Years' Residence in the Island* (London and New York: John Lane, 1908), ch. 16. In the 1940s, the staid DBUC sought to institute historical pageants in place of what they considered to be the overly popular monthly dance parties, with their "jazzy 'Carmen Miranda' sort of songs." See "Report of the Special Committee to Review Matters of Social Recreation, Entertainment, and Sport," *JDBUC*, 33:1 (1943), 1-12.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth David Jackson, "'Bela Infanta' of Sri Lanka: Ballad Fragments in Portuguese Creole Communities," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Sri Lanka Branch*, NS 19 (1975), 17-25.

tions the disagreeable odor of margosa oil, a traditional Sinhalese and Tamil medicinal substance. Belief in the evil eye is reported to have been widespread among the Burghers, and a native concern about the pollution arising from death is reflected in the Burgher practice of bathing and changing clothes immediately following a funeral. The ritual of first shaving by which a Burgher youth attained recognition of his full manhood also corresponds in major respects with old Sri Lankan practices.<sup>60</sup> The Burghers conducted their marriage rites in a dignified Christian manner, but it was also noted that occasionally “when the new Couple are got to Bed, they fall a-beating of Drums, Tamelins, Kettle-drums and such, for about an hour,” an apparent continuation of the French (and Dutch Huguenot?) custom of *charivari* (United States, “shivaree”), or the mocking of incongruous or unpopular marriages by offering a raucous serenade outside the nuptial bedchamber.<sup>61</sup> It was in the realm of social etiquette, however, that the Dutch Burghers may have achieved their most unusual and creative cultural synthesis: they managed to ritualize in a European idiom the irrepressible and messy Sri Lankan habit of chewing betel.<sup>62</sup>

### *Dutch Burghers in Modern Sri Lanka*

For all of the articulate publicity and scholarly research activity of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon, it should be remembered that this organization has always remained a small association of middle- and upper-class Burghers, largely centered on Colombo. The DBUC started with 268 members in 1908, apparently never exceeded 500 members at its zenith, and had fallen to 140 full members at last report.<sup>63</sup> Its founder, R. G. Anthonisz, was for many years Government Archivist of Ceylon, and other leading members were similarly well placed in government, business, and the professions. Consequently, the DBUC was perennially troubled by charges of elitism from the outside and of cliquism from within. Although the pages of the *JDBUC* cautioned members not to behave as though membership in the Union con-

<sup>60</sup> Toussaint, "Burghers in Early British Times," 41-55.

<sup>61</sup> Schweitzer, "Journal and Diary," 76; compact edition of the Oxford *English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1971), II, 290; and Thomas R. Trautmann, personal communication.

<sup>62</sup> The prescribed ritual of a Dutch Burgher ladies' tea party in eighteenth century Ceylon consisted of the following: (1) Arriving and kissing the hostess three times on the mouth, while continuing to chew betel and spices (Portuguese, *cheira boca*, "to sniff the mouth"), (2) rinsing the mouth graciously with a tumbler of water offered on a polished salver, then spitting into a spittoon, (3) drinking precisely three cups of tea, with confections, (4) repacking the mouth with betel, areca nut, quicklime, and spices, (5) retiring to a separate room for ladies' gossip, (6) reemerging and rinsing the mouth a second time, (7) consuming a second round of tea and confections, (8) repacking the mouth with betel for a third time, (9) offering a final exchange of betel-kisses at the doorway, (10) departing with one's retinue of slave girls, who carry the betel boxes and umbrellas. John Christopher Wolf, *The Life and Adventures of John Christopher Wolf, Late Principal Secretary of State at Jaffanapatnam in Ceylon* (London: G. & J. Robinson, 1785), quoted in J. R. Toussaint, "Dutch Ladies Who Lived in Ceylon," *JDBUC*, 29:2 (1939), 31-42.

<sup>63</sup> Manik de Silva, "The Dutch connection of Burghers and Breeders," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 111 (January 2-8, 1981), 60-63.

veyed "a kind of patent of nobility," at the same time, the members were by no means social equals. A hint of the internal stratification of the DBUC may be gleaned from the fact that mere membership in the Union did not provide entree to the separate D.B.U. Club until 1926, when the two institutions were finally pressured to amalgamate.<sup>64</sup>

The Burghers' reserved ethnic electorate was dissolved by the establishment of universal adult franchise in the Donoughmore reforms of 1931. The Burghers were granted special nominated representation in the parliament of newly independent Ceylon, but they quickly felt their vulnerability as neo-Europeans in an era of Sri Lankan nationalism. The number of people who were officially returned as Burghers in the census was always tiny (0.7 percent of the population in 1901; 0.6 percent in 1946) but in the thirty years since independence it has become miniscule (0.3 percent in 1971). Some of the reduction may reflect a tendency to shed an identity which is no longer politically or socially advantageous, and some of it may also reflect changing birth and mortality rates in the over-all population. However, it is widely acknowledged that many Burghers have emigrated to Australia, and often those ponderous Dutch genealogies published in the *JDBUC* have provided the required proof of European descent.

Discussions were started in 1956 between the DBUC and three other Burgher organizations then in existence: the Burgher Association, the Burgher Education Fund, and the Burgher Recreation Club. These latter groups, operating on a much broader (nonunilineal) criterion of "Burgherhood" than the DBUC, proposed the creation of an umbrella organization for all Burghers in the country, while the DBUC representatives reportedly held out for "strengthening the four existing Associations." These exclusive preferences of the DBUC were overruled, and the Burgher Welfare Organization was created in 1957.<sup>65</sup> More recently the DBUC has publicly debated the question of loosening its strict genealogical requirements in light of changed conditions, and there is no doubt that informal relations between the Dutch Burghers, the Portuguese Burghers, and the rest of society have become much more friendly and accommodating.<sup>66</sup>

#### IV. FIELD REPORT: THE BURGHERS OF BATTICALOA

It is unfortunate that the materials for a social and cultural history of the Portuguese descendants in Sri Lanka are so sparse and unexplored, for a great deal remains unknown about the origin and transmission of Ceylon-

<sup>64</sup> Niemand [pseud.], "Notes by Niemand," *JDBUC*, 5:1 (1912), 22; R. G. Anthonisz, "Presidential Address," *JDBUC*, 13:1-2 (1921), 27-29; "Remarks," *JDBUC*, 15:4 (1926), 132.

<sup>65</sup> R. S. V. Poulier, "President's Address at the 49th General Meeting," *JDBUC*, 47:2-3 (1957), 53-59.

<sup>66</sup> G. V. Grenier, " 'Burgher' Etymology," 29-30; Tissa Fernando, "Burghers of Ceylon," 77.

Portuguese cultural patterns, a prior ethnic heritage which even the leading Dutch Burgher families somehow preserved. Just as important, the lack of accessible data hampers efforts to trace the destiny of that less distinct, but much larger, category of “ordinary” Dutch and Portuguese Eurasians who actually came to live on terms of social parity and propinquity with the Sinhalese and Tamil inhabitants of the island. The Burghers of the Batticaloa district are the only such group about which much ethnographically seems known at all, notwithstanding widespread reports that the mixed Portuguese were a ubiquitous component of society in all nineteenth-century towns.<sup>67</sup> A glimpse of the Burghers of Batticaloa will suggest how at least one group of Dutch and Portuguese descendants now fits into the provincial society of Sri Lanka.

### *Historical Background*

Ironically, the eastern littoral of Sri Lanka, which is today relatively less developed and less Westernized, was the route by which some of the first European contacts were made with the Kandyan kingdom. The nominal control of this coastline by the Portuguese in the early seventeenth century did not prevent the Dutch from landing in 1602 and sending several parties of emissaries to the Kandyan court. In 1627 the Portuguese finally erected a fortification at the present site of Batticaloa town, but the Dutch captured it in 1638 as part of their gradual expulsion of the Portuguese from the island. The commander of the Dutch siege, Willem Jacobsz Coster, later reported that the vanquished defenders had numbered “about 700 in all, among whom were 50 Portuguese and mestices, the rest being blacks, women and children.” The Portuguese officers and men were quickly deported to Nagappattinam in south India, while the “mestices” and blacks were presumably handed over, along with other native collaborators, to the vengeance of King Rajasinha, the Kandyan ally of the Dutch.<sup>68</sup>

The Dutch made Batticaloa a permanent V.O.C. outpost in the 1660s, when they rebuilt the fortifications and commenced a modest trade in elephants, areca nuts, rice, and salt, but not until 1766 did the Dutch company control much territory beyond the precincts of the fort. However, in the final thirty years of Dutch Batticaloa, when the company at last governed the entire coastal plain, revenues were greatly expanded and several important irrigation works were constructed which remain in use today. The district was governed by an exceptionally energetic *Opperhoofd* named Jacob Burnand, who pro-

<sup>67</sup> There have been notes and queries published on the Portuguese traditions of the African-descended Kaffirs of Puttalam, the Portuguese-Canarese Kannadiyars of Mannar, and the exiled Catholics of Wahakotte. Richard L. Brohier, “The Ceylon Kaffir—Their Kafferinhoe and Chikothi,” in his *Discovering Ceylon*, (Colombo: Lake House, 1973), ch. 5; Edmund Pieris, “An Interesting Ethnical Group from Mannar,” *Ceylon Historical Journal*, 3:1 (1953), 13-17.

<sup>68</sup> J. R. Toussaint, “The Dutch Connection with Batticaloa,” *JDBUC*, 19:2 (1929), 82-84.

moted the efficiency of agriculture and of taxation with equal zeal. Yet, despite its much-commended profitability to the company between 1766 and 1796, the town of Batticaloa never became more than a well-run, but sleepy, outpost of Dutch commerce.<sup>69</sup> The present Batticaloa is still the regional capital but, aside from the Dutch fort, most of the enduring monuments of Dutch rule are found in the canals, causeways, and irrigation works of the surrounding districts.

Jacob Burnand's detailed 1794 memorial on Batticaloa, written for the edification of his successor, discusses the civil and military establishment there, including about thirty slave families who had provided craftsmen for the company since Portuguese times, but mentions the Burghers only briefly in reference to the jurisdiction of the local courts.<sup>70</sup> Evidently some of the Dutch personnel remained in Batticaloa as married settlers after the British takeover, for one finds that, among the recipients of special relief pensions, the "Batavia money" distributed in 1832 by the Dutch government to needy widows and orphans of former V.O.C. servants in Ceylon, four were women in Batticaloa.<sup>71</sup>

Because the early Batticaloa records have been lost, and even the nineteenth-century archives are meagre, the construction of a history of the Burghers of Batticaloa may be possible today only through an examination of early Catholic church records, including birth and marriage registers which were separately maintained for each caste in the local parish. Ian Smith examined some of these registers for the Burgher "caste," and has noted that the predominance of Portuguese surnames of the early nineteenth century gave way to an influx of Dutch surnames in the late nineteenth century.<sup>72</sup> Today, older informants connect certain Dutch (and Dutch Huguenot) surnames, like Wambeek, Struys, Van Langenburg, and Toussaint, with a once-alooof stratum of Burgher families who would not mix socially with the rest, but this distinction has been erased with the passage of time. The Dutch families who remained in Batticaloa in the British period may have sustained their Protestantism, and their links to the colonial elite, by joining the Anglican and Wesleyan missions, as some of Ian Smith's informants claim, but there seems to have been a broad turn to Catholicism among them by the end of the century. Despite their best efforts to assert social parity, the Burghers of Batticaloa were systematically kept on the second level of the British colonial hierarchy, as reflected even in the graduated amounts allocated to purchase

<sup>69</sup> A Dutch Burgher historian admits as much. J. R. Toussaint, "Batticaloa between 1766 and 1796," *JDBUC*. 20:3 (1931), 103.

<sup>70</sup> Jacob Burnand, *Memorial Compiled by Mr. Jacob Burnand, Late Chief of Batticaloa, for his Successor, Mr. Johannes Philippus Wambeek*, Colombo Museum Library, manuscript (1794), 256-312. Another copy is held in the Public Records Office, London (C.0.54/125. pp. 657-781).

<sup>71</sup> J. R. Toussaint, "Batavia Money," *JDBUC*, 21:3 (1932), 148-55.

<sup>72</sup> Smith, "Sri Lanka Creole Portuguese Phonology," 29.

food for inmates of the Batticaloa Jail *ca.* 1850: Europeans, 7 1/2 d. per diem; Burghers 4 5/8 d.; and natives 3 3/4 d.<sup>73</sup>

### *Culture and Kinship*

Today, groups of racially mixed, creole-Portuguese-speaking inhabitants are still found in Trincomalee and in most of the larger towns in the Batticaloa region. These people are called *parankiyar* (cognate with Feringhee, etcetera) in the Tamil language of this area, or Portuguese Burghers in English. They are all Roman Catholics, living in small clusters of families, residentially concentrated in recognized Burgher neighborhoods, much as the Muslims and the Hindu castes each have their own streets and wards. In the town of Akkaraipattu (population 25,000), where I have done fieldwork, there were ten Portuguese Burgher families out of a total of fifty-five Catholic households. True to the traditional picture of the "Portuguese Mechanic," most of these Burgher households subsisted on artisanal or skilled manual trades (six carpenters, five blacksmiths, one auto mechanic, one clerk).

In the parish of Saint Sebastian in Batticaloa town itself, the concentration of Burghers has grown through a resettlement scheme organized by the local Portuguese Burgher Union.<sup>74</sup> This effort to bring together an otherwise dispersed community has boosted the total number of Burgher families in Batticaloa town to somewhere between 200 and 500, by local estimates. Again, the chief occupations are skilled manual trades (ironwork, carpentry, building trades, printing, automotive repair and body work, tire vulcanizing, the railroad), although some Burghers are also found in clerical positions and in the Catholic priesthood.

Practically no distinctively Dutch ethnic traditions survive among the Burghers of Batticaloa, except probably some elements of Dutch cooking. And even here, the last published sighting of an authentic Dutch *poffertje* cake on the verandah of a local resthouse was made in 1917.<sup>75</sup> However, the number of patrilineal Burgher surnames of clearly Dutch origin (e.g., Wittebron, Outschoorn, Hendrik, Toussaint, Ockersz) is far greater today than the number of Portuguese names (e.g., Rosairo, Andrade).<sup>76</sup> The usual mode of dress among the Burghers is trousers and shirt for the men and stitched one-piece dresses for the women, all of modern European design.

The Creole Portuguese spoken in Batticaloa has been found by Ian Smith to

<sup>73</sup> Pridham, *Historical, Political, and Statistical Account*, II, 859.

<sup>74</sup> This is a local association based in Batticaloa.

<sup>75</sup> A. C. Tutein-Nolthenius, "Old Dutch Custom at Batticaloa," *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*, 3:2 (1917), 138.

<sup>76</sup> Some surnames remain obscure or ambiguous in origin. The name of the Burgher sacristan, for example, is pronounced "di-li-ma," which means it might be the Dutch (Fresian) name Dillema, or possibly a Tamilized pronunciation of the Portuguese name De Lima. Some other ambiguous names are Ragel, Sellar, and Balthazar. The "Batavia Money" surnames are still extant.

have incorporated some distinctive features of the local Batticaloa Tamil dialect. The initial Indo-Portuguese trade language was brought to Ceylon from Goa, but in the linguistic environment of the island it underwent substantial structural convergence with the local languages.<sup>77</sup> Despite the long and tenacious history of Creole Portuguese speech in the island, Batticaloa harbors the only significant concentration of Creole speakers now in Sri Lanka, and their fluency is strongly threatened by the local emphasis on Tamil. There was a time, barely more than a hundred years ago, when prominent local Tamils and Moors would have needed to know the Portuguese patois in order to transact business, but now it is the Burghers themselves who must be bilingual in Tamil.

In the Batticaloa region, the enjoyment of Portuguese songs and dances, lubricated with a certain amount of alcohol, is a well-known part of Burgher domestic celebrations, particularly weddings. After nuptial rites in the Catholic church, the newlyweds come to the bride's house, where they sit and watch the guests dance the traditional *bailas* around them. Burghers do not tie the Tamil wedding necklace, *tāli*, but in other respects they seem to share the sacramental rituals of the Tamil Catholics.<sup>78</sup>

The kinship terminology of the Batticaloa Burghers is a fascinating mixture of Portuguese, Dutch, and English elements, although the Portuguese predominate, and a few terms are of uncertain origin (see Table 1). There are two features which suggest a borrowing from local Tamil/Moorish (Dravidian-type) kinship structure: a distinction between elder and younger siblings, and a separation of cross-cousins (*kozēn / neki*) from parallel cousins (*irumām*). The latter would be consistent with Ian Smith's report that cross-cousin marriage, a preferred marriage form among the Sinhalese, the Tamils, and the Moors, is practiced also by the Batticaloa Burghers.<sup>79</sup> My own genealogical sample of Burghers in Akkaraipattu corroborates this to a limited extent, but I found no instances of "close" cross cousin marriage. I suspect that cross cousin marriage is not as widely practiced among the Burghers as among the Tamils and Moors, and one of the reasons would surely be the Catholic ban on marriage within the prohibited degrees of kinship.

### *Burghers in Caste Society*

On the basis of my own fieldwork among the Tamils and Moors of eastern Sri Lanka, it is possible to gain some perspective on the place held by the

<sup>77</sup> Ian R. Smith, "Convergence in South Asia: A Creole Example," *Lingua*, 48:2/3 (1979), 193-222; "Substrata vs. Universals in the Formation of Sri Lanka Portuguese," *Papers in Pidgin and Creole Linguistics 2, Pacific Linguistics*, series A, no. 57, forthcoming, 183-200.

<sup>78</sup> As with the Catholic Tamils, baptism creates such strong ties of godparenthood that marrying a godparent's child is tantamount to sibling incest. For comparable data on Sinhalese Catholic godparenthood, see R. L. Stirrat, "Compadrazgo in Catholic Sri Lanka," *Man*, NS 10:4(1975), 589-606.

<sup>79</sup> Smith, "Sri Lanka Creole Portuguese Phonology," 32.

TABLE 1  
*Kinship Terminology of the Batticaloa Burghers*

<i>Kintype</i>	<i>Kin Term<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>Probable Origin</i>
<i>Grandfather</i>	gaempā, graenpā	<i>Engl.</i>	grandpa
<i>Grandmother</i>	gaemmā, graenmā	<i>Engl.</i>	grandma
<i>Father</i>	pāy, pəpā	<i>Port.</i>	pai, papa
	daedi	<i>Engl.</i>	daddy
<i>Mother</i>	māy, māmā	<i>Port.</i>	mae, mama
	māmi	<i>Engl.</i>	mummy
<i>Stepfather</i>	əvəpāy	<i>Port.</i>	avo ( <i>grandfather</i> ) + pai?
<i>Stepmother</i>	əvəmay	<i>Port.</i>	avo ( <i>grandmother</i> ) + mae?
<i>Father-in-law</i>	sōgru	<i>Port.</i>	sogro
<i>Mother-in-law</i>	sōgra	<i>Port.</i>	sogra
<i>Uncle</i>	onkal	<i>Engl.</i>	uncle
	ōm	<i>Dutch</i>	oom
<i>Aunt</i>	aenti	<i>Engl.</i>	aunty
	tānte	<i>Dutch</i>	tante
<i>Husband</i>	mərīdu	<i>Port.</i>	marido
<i>Wife</i>	muyērə	<i>Port.</i>	mulher
	jifrəw	<i>Dutch</i>	Juffrouw <sup>b</sup>
<i>Sibling of either sex</i>	irumām	<i>Port.</i>	irmao/irma ( <i>brother/sister</i> )
<i>Parallel cousin<sup>0</sup></i>	irumām	{ <i>same</i> }	
	kozēn irumām	<i>Dutch</i>	kozijn ( <i>cousin</i> ) <sup>b</sup>
<i>True biological sibling</i>	maezmu irumām	<i>Port.</i>	mesmo ( <i>same, real</i> )
	suwə irumām	<i>Port.</i>	sua ( <i>your, one's own</i> )
<i>Brother</i>	māči irumām	<i>Port.</i>	macho ( <i>male</i> )
<i>Elder brother</i>	bū, būā	<i>Dutch</i>	broer
	grāndirumām	<i>Port.</i>	grande ( <i>big</i> )
<i>Younger brother</i>	pikinirumām	<i>Port.</i>	pequenino ( <i>tiny</i> )
<i>Sister</i>	faemiyə irumām	<i>Port.</i>	femea ( <i>female</i> )

Burghers within the larger regional system of castes and ethnic communities, each defined by mixed and overlapping criteria, including caste, religion, language, occupation, unilineal descent, “race,” historical origin, and domestic practices. My informants complained that groups like the Burghers were anomalous and could not easily be ranked on a single scale with the local Hindu castes.<sup>80</sup> For one thing, the Burghers are seen as relative newcomers to the ancient society of Sri Lanka, a group with no charter in the textual traditions. Despite what one informant admitted was their “Dravidian cut,” they are descended from Europeans and are entitled to a degree of consideration as “whitemen” (Tamil, *vellaikkārar*), people of a separate “race”

<sup>80</sup> Dennis B. McGilvray, “Tamils and Moors: Caste and Matriclan Structure in Eastern Sri Lanka” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1974), 61-89.



TABLE 1 (Continued)

<i>Kintype</i>	<i>Kin Term</i> <sup>a</sup>		<i>Probable Origin</i>
<i>Elder sister</i>	čičā	?	
<i>Younger sister</i>	[no term recorded]		
<i>Male cross-cousin</i> <sup>c</sup>	kozēn	<i>Dutch</i>	kozijn ( <i>cousin</i> ) <sup>b</sup>
<i>Female cross-cousin</i> <sup>c</sup>	neki	<i>Dutch</i>	nicht ( <i>cousin or niece</i> )
<i>Brother-in-law</i>	kuñādu	<i>Port.</i>	cunhado
<i>Sister-in-law</i>	kuñādə	<i>Port.</i>	cunhada
	susi	<i>Dutch</i>	zusje ( <i>sister</i> )
<i>Son</i>	fīyu	<i>Port.</i>	filho
<i>Daughter</i>	fīyə	<i>Port.</i>	filha
<i>Children, kids</i>	fīfi(s)	<i>Port.</i>	contraction of fīyu/fīya
<i>Son-in-law</i>	jaenru	<i>Port.</i>	genro
<i>Daughter-in-law</i>	norə	<i>Port.</i>	nora
<i>Grandson</i>	naetu	<i>Port.</i>	neto
<i>Granddaughter</i>	naetə	<i>Port.</i>	neta

<sup>a</sup> Because the Creole Portuguese language of the Burghers has no standard written form, the kin terms listed here are rendered in the system of phonetic transcription used by Ian Smith. Symbols *f* and *d* are alveolar, *t* and *d* dental, stops.

<sup>b</sup> *Juffrouw* means “young unmarried woman” in modern Dutch, but it was commonly used for “wife” among working-class Hollanders of the seventeenth century. *Kozijn* (cousin) is Flemish usage. (Hans Van Coetsem, Cornell University, personal communication.)

<sup>c</sup> Parallel cousins are children of a father's brother or a mother's sister. Cross-cousins are children of a father's sister or a mother's brother. In kinship systems of Sri Lanka and southern India, parallel cousins are regarded as classificatory siblings, while cross-cousins are seen as potential spouses and affines.

SOURCES: The list of Burgher kinship terms is compiled from data supplied by Nilam Hamead of Akkaraipattu, Sri Lanka, and by Ian Smith of Monash University, Australia. This must be considered a provisional listing, subject to revision in light of future research.

(Tamil, *inam*). Their religion is Catholicism, which excludes them from the local and regional cycle of Hindu temple festivals and Muslim celebrations where local group status hierarchies are ritually displayed, contested, and ratified. It is not so much a problem of their Catholic faith, since the Muslims recognize it as a “religion of the Book” and the Hindus are attracted to the Virgin Mary as an extension of their Shakti cult. Rather, it is their lack of an authorized “share” (Tamil, *panku*) in wider community ritual, coupled with their lack of a hereditary *jajmani-type* clientship role in the domestic sphere, which makes it difficult for local people to assign the Burghers a clear caste role and caste status. As Louis Dumont would say, the Burghers are not a true caste because they are not an organic part of a total caste system.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Dennis B. McGilvray, “Mukkuvar Vannimai: Tamil Caste and Matriclan Ideology in Batticaloa, Sri Lanka,” in *Caste Ideology and Interaction*, D. B. McGilvray, ed. (Cambridge:

On the other hand, the Burghers do exhibit a number of caste-like features which greatly contribute both to their public image and to their own sense of group identity. Their occupations are not strictly hereditary, but the group is very strongly associated with certain skilled manual trades. In the small towns, Burghers are most often carpenters and blacksmiths, and my genealogical data indicate considerable occupational continuity across generations and among intermarrying families. The Burghers tend to have their own recognized neighborhoods, which in Akkaraipattu were near the Catholic church, often adjacent to those of middle-ranking Hindu artisan castes. However, residential segregation is seldom as complete as with Hindu castes. A similar judgment can be rendered with respect to the degree of Burgher endogamy: there is a tendency toward in-marriage, but in the genealogies I collected in Akkaraipattu almost one third of the Burgher marriages involved a Tamil or Sinhalese partner. While the rate of endogamy is presumably higher in Batticaloa town, where a much larger Burgher marriage pool exists, my evidence suggests a constant admixture of Tamil and Sinhalese blood.<sup>82</sup>

If pressed for a ranking, Hindu Tamils in Akkaraipattu assign the local Burghers rough parity of status with the middle-ranking skilled castes (*Tattar*, Smiths; *Cantar*, Climbers) and modest superiority to the lower-ranking service castes (*Vannar*, Washermen; *Navitar*, Barbers; *Paraiyar*, Drummers). The intermarriage of some Burghers with members of the Climber and Barber castes, their residential proximity to these castes, and the fact that blacksmithing and carpentry are the chief Burgher trades, are the chief criteria employed in this ranking. The Muslim Moors tend to give the Burghers a higher and more discrete caste rank, placing them clearly with the *Tattar*, but awarding them extra kudos within that rank for being Christians rather than Hindus. The greater distance between the Muslim and Burgher residential areas of the town gives the Moors little firsthand knowledge of Burgher life, so their ranking criteria emphasize occupation and religion.<sup>83</sup>

In the Hindu/Muslim society of the region, which is strongly infused with assumptions of caste and ethnic/religious segmental hierarchy, the Burghers have never been able to marshal the wealth and numbers needed to establish and maintain a claim to high group status. However, within the ambit of the locally concentrated Catholic populations, such as in the town of Batticaloa

Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 1982); *idem*, "Sexual Power and Fertility in Sri Lanka: Batticaloa Tamils and Moors," in *Ethnography of Fertility and Birth*, Carol P. McCormack, ed. (London: Academic Press, forthcoming 1982); *idem*, "Paraiyar Drummers of Sri Lanka: Consensus and Constraint in an Untouchable Caste," *American Ethnologist* (in press); Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

<sup>82</sup> The pattern of intermarriage between Burghers and local Tamils in the Batticaloa region may allow some useful flexibility in ethnic labeling. The Tamils and Moors reckon caste and clan descent matrilineally, while the Burghers are patrilineal (i.e., patronymic), so the offspring of mixed marriages might choose whichever identity seemed politically most advantageous.

<sup>83</sup> McGilvray, "Tamils and Moors," 73-77.

itself, the Burghers have traditionally asserted a strong competitive claim to high status and special distinction within the Catholic community. In this sense, the Catholic Tamils and Burghers replicate the familiar Hindu and Muslim pattern of internal rivalry for high group status in the idiom of public religious ceremonial, only in this case, the arena of competition is the church feast rather than the temple or mosque festival.

A vivid example of this occurred in 1897, shortly after the arrival in Batticaloa of the French Jesuits who took charge of the new diocese. In addition to suppressing the activities of *diableurs* (sorcerers) and concubinarians amongst the Catholic flock, the fathers had to face the problem of caste rivalry between the two main churches in the town of Batticaloa. The parishioners of Saint Mary's were Burghers, *Velalar* (Cultivators), and Barbers, while those of Saint Anthony's were exclusively *Karaiyar* (Fishermen). There had always been disputes over the smallest questions of ritual precedence, e.g., which group should spread the cloths before the Blessed Sacrament in the Corpus Christi procession, or whether one caste or another had been assigned a better reading in the Easter Passion play, *pasku*. When Saint Anthony's was finally selected to receive the new diocesan bishop, Saint Mary's boycotted the welcoming celebrations. There was even some talk at Saint Mary's about breaking away from Rome and affiliating with the "Portuguese Catholic Church" of the Goan schismatic, Bishop Alvarez, but most of the discontent among the Burghers and their allies was channeled into an accelerated, but unauthorized, building program aimed at achieving a decisive architectural victory for Saint Mary's. The fathers sought to delay this project in the hope of eventually getting a much grander diocesan cathedral for the new bishop, but their motives were highly suspect in the eyes of the Burghers. In a tactical faux pas, the French Jesuits organized a nocturnal mission to confiscate the bells from Saint Mary's, but the bell-lifters were caught red-handed, the bishop's campaign to impose ecclesiastical authority on the Burghers backfired, and rioting between Saint Mary's and Saint Anthony's ensued. In the end, the bishop asserted his property rights over Saint Mary's in court, but only after the Burghers had clearly demonstrated their strength in the lay Catholic hierarchy.<sup>84</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION: ETHNICITY BEYOND THE ELITE

Nineteenth-century ethnic stereotypes, with their starkly contrasted portrayals of the dignified Dutch Burghers and the degraded Portuguese Mechanics, and the articulate elitist separatism of the Dutch Burgher Union in the twentieth century, with its careful insistence on European pedigrees, perpetuated an

<sup>84</sup> This account is based upon material contained in an unpublished history of the Catholic missions in Batticaloa, written and made available to me by the late Father J. W. Lange, S.J.: "The Secluded Coast: The Story of the Diocese of Trincomalee-Batticaloa, Ceylon, 1895- 1970," ch.9.

image of the Eurasian community as a virtual moiety system, rigidly polarized along the axes of racial mix, cultural identity, and socioeconomic class. While there is no doubt that a strong clerical and professional elite of racially mixed ancestry, emphasizing Dutch colonial origins, formed a distinct urban middle-class element in Sri Lankan society throughout the British period, the prominence of this Dutch Burgher elite has tended to obscure the history and modern fate of the much larger residual category of “not-so-Dutch” Burghers and Portuguese Mechanics.

In retrospect, it seems clear that acquiring the title of Burgher or Dutch Burgher became an advantageous maneuver in the nineteenth century for many lower-status urbanites whose disregard for the details of pedigree exploited a surprisingly porous social boundary between “Burgher” and “Mechanic.” According to an indignant “Burgher gentleman” quoted by Arunachalam, “it is not an uncommon experience for every nondescript who affects a pair of trousers and cannot by any right be classed under any particular category to call himself a 'Burgher' and to take refuge under that very convenient term.”<sup>85</sup> In the census of 1871, which permitted a choice of self-designations among the racially mixed inhabitants, the prestigious categories of “Burgher” and “Dutch” together accounted for roughly 70 percent of the responses, the more vague “Eurasian” made up 20 percent, while the stigmatized “Portuguese” represented only 8 percent. Digby, ever a partisan for the Dutch, took this as a hopeful sign that the Portuguese Mechanics were headed for biological extinction, but it is evident that they were merely opting for more respectable and useful ethnic labels.<sup>86</sup>

The specific example of the Dutch Burgher Union in the twentieth century certainly offers support for the views of Abner Cohen, who sees “ethnicity” as a political tactic, a set of cultural boundaries erected to serve underlying political and economic interests.<sup>87</sup> The metropolitan Burgher elite did seek to protect its security and status in the changing colonial system by asserting a strong claim to Dutch racial and cultural labels, although the actual content of Dutch Burgher ethnicity remained more largely Portuguese and English than anything else. The Dutch Burghers were contending in a sea of official census categories: Kandyan Sinhalese, Low Country Sinhalese, Ceylon Tamils, Indian Tamils, Ceylon Moors, Indian Moors, Malays, Veddahs, and Europeans. Their propagation of a separate racial-ethnic identity must be seen in large part as a response to the perception of organized political and economic pressure from other recognized “native races.”

Among the less presumptuous outstation Burghers, such as those of Bat-

<sup>85</sup> Arunachalam, “Population,” in *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon*, Wright, ed., 343.

<sup>86</sup> Census figures for 1871, corrected for arithmetic errors, from Digby, “Eurasians,” 194.

<sup>87</sup> Abner Cohen, “Introduction: The Lesson of Ethnicity,” in *Urban Ethnicity*, Abner Cohen, ed. (London: Tavistock, 1974), ix-xxiv.

ticaloa, however, Eurasian ethnicity was never mobilized for such high stakes, and so the appurtenances of pedigree and antiquarian scholarship were never sought. At this level of Sri Lankan society, there had to be more pragmatic and multiplex modes of articulation between the Burghers and their neighbors, and the pattern which evolved was strongly shaped by the prevailing system of caste and religious segmentation. As illustrated by the rumpus over the theft of the bells in 1897, as well as in the firecracker feud I documented in 1970, the Burghers in Batticaloa are capable of organizing effectively in local arenas of conflict, but they borrow most of the rules of the game from the adjacent Hindu castes and the Moors. Eurasian ethnicity in Sri Lankan hinterlands such as Batticaloa conforms better to the more general idea of ethnicity outlined by Ronald Cohen, namely, a nested series of situationally-contingent social diacritics which, when emphasized, serve to demarcate a group in relation to other social categories defined at the same level of inclusiveness—and of which the “political ethnicity” of Abner Cohen and the Dutch Burgher Union is but a special, indeed a somewhat rarefied, case.<sup>88</sup>

Self-conscious Burgher ethnicity certainly does not carry the full burden of group-boundary maintenance in outstation areas like Batticaloa, where this function is already served in part by patterns of endogamy, residential segregation, hereditary occupation, parish identification, and the like—social diacritics which also serve to differentiate other local castes and religious communities. Eurasian ethnicity here cannot so easily be seen as a separate thing in itself: it certainly lacks the corporateness and political sensitivity of the metropolitan Dutch Burgher elite. Today the Burghers of Batticaloa lay no particular stress upon the Dutch versus the Portuguese elements of their heritage, and the surrounding population seems quite indifferent to this distinction. They are simply Burghers, who have reached a viable, if at times awkward, accommodation with local society. It seems likely that their fortunes reflect the fate of similar Eurasian groups elsewhere on the island.

<sup>88</sup> Ronald Cohen, "Ethnicity: Problem and Focus in Anthropology," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 7(1978), 379-403.