

COMPOSITORIAL AND MISSIONARY PRACTICES: THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY DUTCH PRESS IN COLOMBO

THIS PAPER GREW OUT OF my interest in a book discovered while I was engaged in descriptive cataloguing in the Rare Books Section of the National Library of Australia as part of the Australia and New Zealand Early Imprints Project. The book is an eighteenth-century Tamil version of the New Testament, printed in colonial Ceylon, at the Dutch East India Company's Press at Colombo. Its title-page (see Plate 1) translates freely as follows:

The New Testament, or All the Books of the New Covenant of our Lord Jesus Christ. By Order of the High Authority of this Island. Translated out of the original Greek language into the Tamil Speech, and properly reviewed by order of the Church. Printed in Colombo, at the [East-India] Comp[any]'s Ordinary Printing Press by Pieter Bruwaart, Anno 1759.¹

While preparing the collation statement I was struck by the irregularity of the signature series, in particular, the two W gatherings, the use of V in the first instance and U in the second, where avoiding the similarity of VV and W could hardly be an issue, and the duplicate signatures, all of which led me to suspect the work had been printed in sections.² The collation is as follows:

(†)-2(†)⁴, ²(†)-3(†)⁴, A-H⁴, ²A-V⁴, W⁴ (-W4), 2A-2H⁴, 2I², 3A-3U⁴, 3W⁴, 3X-4H⁴, (*)-2(*)⁴, ²(*)-2(*)⁴, 3(*)²

(†)-2(†)⁴ contain the Dutch title-page and preliminaries; ²(†)-3(†)⁴ contain the Tamil title-page and preliminaries. A-4H⁴ contain the New Testament in Tamil, foliated in Tamil numerals. (*)-2(*)⁴ contain the Dutch index; ²(*)-3(*)² contain the Tamil index. O4 and 2(*)⁴ are blank leaves.

The use of both a Dutch and a vernacular title-page (in this case Tamil) was the norm for books printed at the Colombo Press. The vernacular title-pages were located in various positions, often directly following the Dutch title-page, sometimes on its verso.³

Both title-pages display the woodcut vignette, which Diehl documents as the norm for Colombo imprints from 1739 onwards, appearing on one or both of the two title-pages. The vignette is emblematic of the mission of spiritual enlightenment, which the Dutch East-India Company understood, along with the commercial impetus, as the function of its presence in its colonial domains. The scene depicted is the arrival of the company ships together with the figure of an annunciating angel. In the right hand corner of the image are the initials MMLI, indicating the four gospels, while the Greek and Latin inscriptions underline the iconography of the image: *The people which sat in darkness saw great light.* Math. 4:16.

Woodcut headpieces and tailpieces separate the books of the New Testament (see Plate 2). The book also displays the common conventions employed by Colombo Press compositors for initial capitals in the Dutch and in the vernacular text.⁴ The large initial letters in the Dutch preliminaries are single units, whereas the initial letters beginning the chapters of the Tamil New Testament are set within factotums, into which any letter could be inserted as appropriate. Several different factotums are employed in the book. Plate 2 contains an example of one of these.

Sinhalese compositors at the Press had a separate series of frames which were employed for the setting of documents in Sinhala characters. Diehl notes that only rarely was an exchange made between the two founts, while the use of the frames for Dutch text was virtually unknown.

The Dutch Preface is signed SIGISB. ABRAH. BRONSVELD [Siebert Abrahamszen Bronsveld] and J.J. FYBRANDS [Johan Joachim Fijbrants]. Bronsveld and Fijbrants were both offspring of marriages between a Dutch father and an indigenous mother, and were former pupils of the seminary at Colombo.⁵ Both went on to study in Holland and returned to take up the ministry in Colombo. The translation itself is the work chiefly of J.P. Wetzelius, S. de Silva and Philip de Melho, the latter a distinguished Tamil scholar and poet, a former pupil of the Dutch school at Colombo. His prose style in translation was praised for its artistic qualities, in comparison with the more mundane style of translation from the Danish Mission Press at Tranquebar.⁶

Investigation of the social and political context of the establishment of the Dutch press in Colombo, and of printing in the Indian sub-continent in general, leads to the conclusion that the peculiarities of the book are linked to the particular political and missionary organization of the Dutch East-India Company and its educational establishments in colonial Ceylon. (To serve custom and convenience, the *Nederlandsche Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* will be hereafter referred to as the NVOC.) The history of the Press at Colombo is interesting, and I propose in this paper to sketch in details of that history and political context as a backdrop to my conclusions and speculations as to the print-shop organization which might account for the distinctive compositorial sequence of the 1759 *Het Nieuw Testament*. I would like at the outset to acknowledge the help of Mr Graham Shaw of the India Office Library, whose paper on printing in the Indian sub-continent, delivered at the History of Books Conference held at Monash University in 1986, prompted some lines of investigation and who has been helpful enough to suggest sources I might consult in my investigation of the book and its printers.

The NVOC in Ceylon

The NVOC gained a foothold in Ceylon with the treaty established in 1638 between the Company and the Sinhalese King of Kandy, Rajasinha II (c.1629-1687), the only indigenous monarch still reigning free from foreign domination. Rajasinha wished to end Portuguese rule in Ceylon and was prepared to offer trade advantages to the Dutch in return for their aid in expelling the Portuguese, who were finally forced from the island in 1658. While the Sinhalese monarch retained control of the highland interior, the Dutch territory was controlled from the former Portuguese stronghold at Colombo by the Governor and Council of Ceylon.⁷ The island was of both mercantile and strategic value to the Company, being the source of a rich trade in cinnamon and pepper and, further, was located in a position central for control of the trade to India and the rest of Asia, hence the interest of the Portuguese and the British in the island.

But the NVOC was not merely a trading venture. It functioned as a peculiar amalgam of government, missionary and business organization. The Company became

the effective government of the province: ruler, educator, religious reformer, developer and cultural colonizer. As van Goor comments: 'Nowhere else in Asia was the Company involved so intimately and for such an extended period with the governing of a large indigenous population.'⁸

Population

The indigenous population consisted of three major ethnic groups, all of Indian origin. These were:

1. The Sinhalese — who were Buddhist and whose language, Sinhalese (modern form: Sinhala), was derived from Sanskrit;
2. The Tamils — who were Hindus and whose language was Tamil; and
3. The Moors — who were Moslems and who were speakers of Tamil.

The *lingua franca* of Ceylon during the Dutch period was Portuguese. Despite efforts to supplant it with Dutch it remained the common language of communication, and many products of the Colombo Press were printed in Portuguese.

In addition to their language, the Portuguese had brought Catholicism to Ceylon, and many of the inhabitants continued to profess that religion. To the Dutch, the indigenous Catholics were a potential fifth column in the case of attack by a Catholic power, such as the Portuguese or, from 1690 onwards, the French. Hence missionary zeal had an additional practical political impetus. The same attitude was maintained towards non-Christian, indigenous religion, since the Sinhalese retained a strong loyalty to Buddhist Kandy and its dynasty.

The NVOC, then, from the outset attempted to promote conversion to Protestant Christianity, not only from firm missionary principles, but also as a means of committing to itself the indigenous population. Initially, the spread of the Dutch language was a vital arm of this religious-political programme. To this end the NVOC established mission schools at Nallur, near Jaffna (1690-1723), and at Colombo (1696-1796) to train an educated elite who would act as interpreters, government officials and indigenous clergymen. The Dutch Press at Colombo emerged out of the linguistic and missionary programme established by the schools.

Religion was thus a vital aspect of colonialism. Missionary work was seen as an essential arm of the government, while the clergy themselves were viewed as company servants with many secular duties in addition to their missionary and pastoral tasks. Moreover, literacy had commercial and administrative benefits for the Dutch. The NVOC stimulated the study of Sinhalese among its subjects for the purposes of facilitating local village record-keeping.⁹

The Translation of Religious Text

The mission schools and their programmes nurtured a series of talented and indefatigable linguists and translators whose goal, both as preachers and publishers, was to bring the Gospels and other Christian texts to the indigenous people in their own languages.

The creation of the seminaries themselves was the work of Governor Hendrik Adriann van Reede (tenure 1698-91). In this he was ably assisted by the Rev. Simon Kat, who became the first rector of the School at Colombo. Kat was of the opinion that Dutch should be the linguistic medium of these institutions.¹⁰ In the case of missionary work, Kat believed that the indigenous people should be wooed in their own languages. But he also took this further, maintaining that for the purposes of effective preaching and proselytizing it was preferable to train members of the local indigenous population as ministers of religion, rather than relying on Dutch clergymen to attain the necessary skill as linguists in the languages of the island, though this last remained a necessary adjunct to the aims of the programme.

Scriptural translations were seen as the vital agents both of conversion and of linguistic teaching. The Gospels were popularly believed to have a special agency for conversion, hence the drive for translations of these books. Indigenous literature had been examined as a possible source of textbooks for the teaching of language but had been deemed unsuitable because of its 'superstitious' elements.¹¹ Thus, in addition to their pastoral and missionary value, Scriptural texts were viewed by the Dutch educators as the only acceptable tools for the study of language.

Establishment of the Press

The need for readily available copies of the Gospels and other Scriptural texts for the educational and missionary purposes of the seminaries led, in 1737, to the establishment of a Sinhalese and Tamil printing press at Colombo. Prior to the installation of the press, preachers and translators had been forced to rely upon the services of indigenous copyists. This proved a frustrating process, since the copyists had first to be specially trained and then required to make themselves available to come to Colombo each year in order to make the copies that were needed. Labour relations and maintaining a trained workforce in Colombo appeared to be a problem.¹²

The drive for the establishment of the press came from the reform-minded Governor Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff (tenure 1736-1740). Van Imhoff had been impressed by the size of the indigenous congregation which turned out to hear the Rev. J. P. Wetzelius preach in Sinhalese at Gandure in 1737. Wetzelius was subsequently appointed rector of the Seminary at Colombo and director of the printing works.

Van Imhoff's educational reforms included the recognition of the importance of the Portuguese language in the process of church communication and teaching. In addition he gave increased emphasis to literacy and favoured abandonment of rote-learning teaching methods in favour of methods which developed the understanding and perception of the students. All these programmes depended on the employment and continued availability of appropriate Christian reading material. Hence the crucial importance of the press for the promulgation of Christian texts in Sinhalese, Tamil and Portuguese.¹³

In establishing the printing works, van Imhoff sought the help of the Danish Mission Press at Tranquebar, which had been printing works in indigenous languages since 1714.¹⁴ Gabriel Schade, superintendent of the NVOC's arsenal at Colombo fort, has often been credited with the sole responsibility for casting a Sinhalese, and later a

Tamil, fount, in anticipation of the establishment of a printing operation; however, it is now known that van Imhoff sent a letter to the mission at Tranquebar, the nearest printing works experienced in the punch-cutting and casting of Oriental founts. The Lutheran missionaries responded by sending the son of their Danish type-founder, Pieter Michelsen, to aid in the setting-up of a type foundry in Colombo.¹⁵ As Graham Shaw comments, both ‘the Sinhalese and Tamil typefaces follow very closely the scribal hand seen in eighteenth-century manuscripts for Sri Lanka – the calligraphic quality of the Colombo Tamil fount is easily appreciated when set against the more mundane Tranquebar Tamil face of the same period.’¹⁶

Once established, the printing works quickly grew in size and scope. By 1740 a second press was being fitted up.¹⁷ In addition to the output of Christian texts, the printing works produced school texts for use in Dutch, Sinhalese and Tamil schools.¹⁸

Difficulties at the Colombo Press

The difficulties of operating such an isolated press in the midst of intense commercial activity with a shortage of a properly trained workforce were substantial. Paper shortages appear to have been a major practical difficulty for many of the printing works of the Indian sub-continent. This essential item initially had to be shipped from Europe.¹⁹ Shortages of press-parts, ink and type also caused delays in printing. Documents located by van Goor in the Colonial Archives indicate that in one instance the Colombo press stood idle for close to half a year when Sinhalese silver-smiths refused to enter Colombo fort in order to cast type, owing to an outbreak of smallpox in the vicinity.²⁰

Training the workforce was also a problem. At the mission school at Tranquebar a sort of apprenticeship system was set up, whereby pupils were instructed in printing, casting of type and bookbinding. However, in Ceylon, where commercial enterprise was the primary impetus in the island, the training of ‘printers and bookbinders was quite coincidental to collecting cinnamon, preventing illegal sales of pepper and coffee, separating the illegalities from the slave trade, keeping the peace – and making a profit.’²¹ This factor alone would be sufficient to account for the odd register of the 1759 *Het Nieuw Testament*. Such an isolated press, manned by semi-skilled local labour and operating, perhaps for extended periods, without trained European supervision, might easily depart from accepted European norms of composition and imposition.

In addition, it appears from the prevalence of extant printed broadsheets (Dutch: *plakaaten*) distributed by the NVOC for regulatory purposes, that large official ‘religious’ printing projects often had to be sandwiched between such rush-jobs, which took priority over missionary printing in the press-queue.²² It is just possible that type shortages or lack of continuity of compositors due to such a multiplicity of jobs may have contributed to the odd variations in the register – such instances as the use of both U and V, and W in the sequence.

Little information exists as to the sizes of print-runs: this includes both government proclamations and religious material. A letter discovered by van Goor in the Colonial Archives confirms that the Tamil Gospels and Acts (printed in 1748)²³ which form part of the 1759 *Het Nieuw Testament* were printed in a run of 2000.²⁴ Many, or indeed

most, of the sheets may not have been bound and distributed separately, but may have been retained for binding with the entire New Testament when the printing of the later sections was completed in 1759. All that can be surmised with any degree of probability is that the print run for the later sections of the *Het Nieuw Testament* would not have exceeded 2000.

Conclusion

It can be seen that the 1759 *Het Nieuw Testament* neatly illustrates the educational and missionary programmes of the Dutch in colonial Ceylon. Its translation was part of a deliberate linguistic programme of translation of religious texts, designed to bring enlightening and educational reading matter to the indigenous people of Ceylon in their own languages. This programme, for which the work of the Press at Colombo was crucial, served both the missionary goals and the long-term administrative needs of the NVOC.

In appearance, in particular in its use of both Dutch and vernacular title-pages, its use of iconographic motifs, and its use of factotums, the book is typical of other works from the Colombo Press which have been documented by scholars.

Finally, the Dutch Press at Colombo operated under severe difficulties, including shortages of most essential items, labour relations difficulties and, most importantly, the lack of a trained and properly supervised workforce. Its physical, cultural and strategic isolation from Europe influenced its output in many ways, as did the conflict between the missionary and commercial impetus of the NVOC. It is by taking these factors into account that the compositorial peculiarities of the 1759 *Het Nieuw Testament* can best be explained.

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NOTES

1. Bibliographical references to this work can be found in Graham W. Shaw, comp. *The South Asia and Burma Retrospective Bibliography*, Stage 1, 1556-1800 (London, 1987), p.112, sab00292; *Historical Catalogue of Printed Christian Scriptures in the Languages of the Indian Sub-Continent: A Revision, to 1976, based on the Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of Holy Scripture (1903-11)* by T.H. Darlow and H. F. Moule (London, 1977), no. (9107) 2257; M.P.J. Ondaatje, 'A Tabular List of Original Works and Translations, published by the late Dutch Government of Ceylon at their Printing Press at Colombo', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, n.s. 1 (1865), no. 27; T.C.L. Wijnmalen, 'De Drukkers te Colombo. Proeve eener Singaleesche Bibliographie', *Bibliographische Adversaria*, 4 (1878-82), 177.
2. Documentary evidence for this assumption was discovered later: see note 24.
3. See Katharine S. Diehl, 'The Dutch Press in Ceylon, 1734-96', *Library Quarterly*, 42 (1972), 336.
4. Diehl, p.332.
5. C. R. Boxer discusses the policy of encouragement of marriage between Dutch free-burghers and Sinhalese, Tamil and Eurasian women in *The Dutch Seaborne Empire, 1600-1800* (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp.248-49.
6. Shaw, *SABREB*, pp.7, 380; J. van Goor, *Jan Kompenie as Schoolmaster: Dutch Education in Ceylon 1690-1795*, Historische Studies XXXIV, Instituut voor Geschiedenis der Rijkstuniversiteit te Utrecht, (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1978), pp.84, 153.
7. Boxer, pp.105-09, 117.
8. van Goor, p.1. Despite its strongly pro-Dutch flavour, this study is of especial use, because of its thorough-going examination of the Colonial Archives (the Archives of the former NVOC) now held at the Hague. It is also valuable in its focus on the central role of education promulgated by the mission schools of Colombo and Jaffna, since the educational, religious and linguistic nexus provided in these centres both dictated and justified the largest output of the Colombo Press.
9. van Goor, p.21.
10. To reinforce this impetus the NVOC, in 1690, issued an edict to the effect that, after a period of fifteen years, only speakers of the Dutch language would be appointed to senior Company positions; and since the Company was the island's major employer this proved an apt incentive to the colonization of language (van Goor, p.42).
11. van Goor, pp.65-66.
12. van Goor, p.73.
13. van Goor, p.76.
14. See Darlow and Moule, pp.393-94; Dennis E. Rhodes, *The Spread of Printing: Eastern Hemisphere: India, Pakistan, Ceylon, Burma and Thailand* (London, 1969), p.17.
15. Shaw, *SABREB*, pp.7-8, and letter to author, 2 April 1987; Arno Lehman, *Es Begann in Tranquebar* (Berlin, 1956), p.246.
16. Letter to author, 2 April 1987.
17. See van Imhoff's *Memoir* to his successor, Willem Maurits Bruininck (tenure 1740-42) quoted in Diehl, pp.343-44: 'The Printing press established during my administration will be a useful instrument . . . A second press is being fitted up, which must be completed during Your Excellency's administration . . .'
18. See Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya, 'The Beginnings of the Sinhalese Printing Press', in *Studies in South Asian Culture*, v.VII, Senerat Paranavitana Commemoration Volume, ed. Leelananda Prematilleke, et. al. (Leiden, 1978), pp.284-5. For the most complete listing of the output of the Colombo Press see Shaw's *SABREB* compilation, cited above.
19. van Goor, p.85. See also the letter to the SPCK dated 27 September 1714, cited by Darlow and Moule, p.394, concerning paper shortages at Tranquebar: '... We have finished at last the Impression of the *four Evangelists*, and of the *Acts of the Apostles* . . . The Scarcity of Paper has hindered us from pursuing the Impression to the End of the Epistles: For of the *seventy five* Ream of the largest paper you were pleased to send us last year, only *six* remain; but of the lesser Size, which made up your first Present of Paper, we have *thirty* . . . The *Malabar*-Types which were sent from Germany, proved so very large, that they consumed Abundance of Paper: To remove this Inconveniency, our Letter-Founder has . . . cast another Type of a smaller Size, wherewith we design to print the remaining Part of the *New Testament* in the *Damulian [Tamil]* language, for the Benefit of the *Malbarians* . . .'
20. van Goor, p.85.
21. Diehl, p.338.
22. Diehl, p.334.
23. *Het Heylige Evangelium onzes Heeren ende Zaligmakers Jesu Christi . . . ende . . . de Handelingen der Apostelen . . . Gedrukt, tot Colombo: in 's Compagnies Drukkerye, anno 1748* (*SABREB*, sab00889).
24. van Goor, p.86.

HET NIEUW
TESTAMENT,
 ofte
 ALLE DE BOEKEN DES NIEUWEN VERBONDS
 VAN ONSEN HEER
JESUS CHRISTUS.

Door Laft van de
HOOGE OVERHEID DEESES EILANDS
 Uit de oirfpronglyke Griekfche Taal
 In de TAMULSCHE SPRAAK overgezet,
 En
 Naar Kerken-order behoorlyk overzien.



Gedrukt te COLOMBO in 's Comps: gewoone Drukkery
 door Pieter Bruwaart. A^o: MDCCLIX.

Plate 1

From *Het Nieuw Testament* (Colombo, 1759), reproduced
 by permission of the National Library of Australia
 (original 25cm x 20cm)

க: ஆதி.

யெஞ



அரசியசிஷ்டயொவனெஸெ முதிவைததசுவிசெஷிம ஸ

க. ஆதிகாரம்.

க: கிளித்த தூரதாச றுவெஸ்பானுடைய நிததிய
வாரதசையும் உணமையானச றுவெஸ்பானு
ருசகல்காரியதனை திருவிடம்கரும மனவிரு
வெடவும பிந்தானமாக அயனா விசுவதிகக்
வாகநாட்டவருசீவியமும் வெளிச்சமுமாய்
ருகந்ரு நொனமும். யச: இரதவாரததை மாந
கிஷ்டமா சுகதெனமூர நொருத துககாணபிக்க
பபட்டமும். யிச: இயருடைய ஆளவ
சையினாட்டவசுதொழிலினுடையவுமபொ
நததனமமையசொனயிழிலநானகளை யொ
யன வெளிசொட்கிடுகாடுததமும். உயச: அபப
டிவெசனனுதையதொழிலககொண்குருசா
டக்கொசாததமும். உயச: கிளித்த தூரதாச
வெஸ்பானு: டயசதனுமாயசசெமமன்ப
வெடவாரமருகந்ரு நொனமும். நயச: பரிசுச
உயச: வாரவா வாரபெரிவியி நகலிசந்ரு
அவாதசக்கு அறிப்பபட்டானமும் ம
பயபிழசதமபனண்தம. நயச: சி: தசசா
டகியவெடகிடுகொவன: வெசுடைய சூ
னமயசொககந கிளித்த தூரதாசபபிவ: பரிசு

தம. சயச: அவாகளிவொருதனான அநதியொய
லதன துககொதானுசீமொண்ககிளித்த தூர
தரிடததிவெகொண்டிவரத தம. சயச: அவா
வனுசருபபெத துறுசெனநூராமத நககொ
டுதததம. சயச: கிளித்த தூரதாபிவிப்புசைய
பைத்தககொண்டதம. சயச: பிவிப்புந்ரு
தருயெண்ககிளித்த தூரதரிடததிவெகொண்டி
வரத தம. சயச: அவனிவனாசச றுவெஸ்பானு
டையருமாரொனெ றுசவகித்த தம ஒருசீஷ்ண
காரத துககொளபபட்டதம வருமா று ஸ

வாரததையான துஷியிலெயிருத து
இரதவாரததச றுவெஸ்பான்
வாரததிவெயிருத து இரதவாரததை
ச றுவெஸ்பானுயிருத து ஸ
உயச: இரதவாரததச றுவெஸ்பான்
பாட்டததிவெயிருத து ஸ
ந. இரதவாரததசகல்காரியங்களுடையகசப
பபட்டு உணடாகபபட்டயா தொருநா ரிய
யமா: இம் இரதவாரததம இணடாகசபபப
லில ஸ
ச. இரதவாரததசகல்காரியங்களுடையிருத து
P
ரத

From Het Nieuw Testament (Colombo, 1759), reproduced by permission of the National Library of Australia (original 25cm x 20cm)

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