

LETTERS DEALING WITH THE SLAVE TRADE FROM CEYLON

THE ONDAATJE CORRESPONDENCE, 1728 TO 1737

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Chettiar¹ Nicolaas Jurgen Ondaatje² from Colombo, Ceylon, happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.³ Proficient in Dutch, Sinhala and Portuguese beside his native tongue Tamil, he was engaged by the Dutch minister Joan Bernhard Noordbeek in Galle, Ceylon, as interpreter and middleman in the rank of "bookkeeper." When in 1727 his employer was found guilty of a crime that has remained unspecified and was evicted from office, Nicolaas was made to share in his patron's fate. He was sentenced to be exiled at the Cape of Good Hope for a period of ten years. What crimes Nicolaas and Noordbeek were accused of has remained a mystery, since the documents of the respective court cases are lost. Probably, however, they had merely raised the suspicion of the paranoid governor Petrus Vuyst (1726-1729).⁴ In the case of Noordbeek the implementation of the sentence was postponed and in the end the verdict was revoked altogether. In Nicolaas's case, however, the sentence was carried out immediately. He arrived at the Cape in the beginning of 1728, when his name was entered on 14 February of that year.⁵ Next

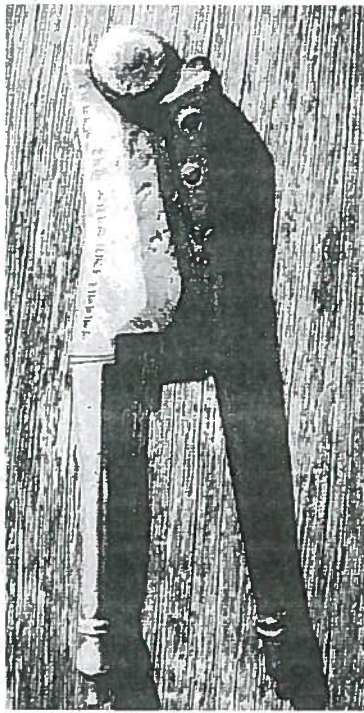
¹The Chettiars form a merchant caste, which has its origin in the coastal area of South India opposite Ceylon. In the nineteenth century many of its members developed from simple salt dealers into international traders and bankers. The Chettiars in eighteenth-century Colombo were mainly servants of the Dutch East India Company.

²The name is also spelled as Ondatje. Ondaatje is the Dutch version of Tamil Ukantācci or Ontācci (pronounced as Ughandacci and Ondacci respectively).

³Next year, Manohar in Delhi, India will publish an annotated translation of the Tamil letters discussed below, in a series called *Dutch Sources on South Asia*. I will not here name the many colleagues and friends who have helped me in the course of preparing the edition, but make one exception: I thank Antonia Malan for drawing my attention to this unique collection of letters in the first place and for the assistance offered in the later stages of the work.

⁴The direct cause for Noordbeek's conviction seems to have been a letter from the commander of Galle, Johannes Jenner, who complained that the minister had postponed the celebration of the Holy Communion for one week without his permission. However, a month before, Jenner had written that Noordbeek did have permission for the postponement (*Generale Missiven van Gouverneur-Generaal en Raden aan de Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie. Deel 8, 1725-1729, GS 193, page 187*). It is unlikely that Jenner made this U-turn without having assured himself that Governor Vuyst would not prosecute him for perjury. It may well have been Vuyst who had urged Jenner to write the second letter condemning Noordbeek. After Noordbeek's subsequent rehabilitation, Nicolaas's family expected him to be rehabilitated soon afterwards as well, which suggests that the cases against Noordbeek and Nicolaas were closely related.

to this entry the word “*overleden*” may be found, or “passed away.” From other papers related to Nicolaas we know that he died, apparently quite unexpectedly, some time between the end of July and the end of August 1737, that is, when the term of his exile was about to expire.



Courtesy of James Armstrong

Fig. 3-1:~ Areca nutcracker

During the nearly ten years between Nicolaas’ arrival at the Cape in 1728 and his death in 1737 he maintained contact with his home country through letters. His own letters are lost, but those he received from Ceylon, seventy in all, have been preserved. Disciplined bookkeeper that he was, Nicolaas kept the incoming letters in a file, which after his death came into the possession of the Orphan Chamber in Cape Town and is now part of the collection of the Western Cape Archives and Records Service. Apart from a few in Dutch and one in Sinhala, the incoming letters are in Tamil. They were written by family and friends of the Ondaatje family. From a South Asian perspective the letters are unique, as we have no earlier examples of private correspondence. The correspondents wrote about marriages, births, illnesses and deaths, about jobs and promotions, about their desire to see Nicolaas again and their attempts to get the duration of his exile reduced.

They also wrote to announce and confirm parcels which they sent to Nicolaas. The content of these parcels consisted mainly of clothes and pieces of cloth, and in one case sliced areca nuts and a nut slicer, which a South Asian could not do without!

They also sent seeds, in particular of citrus trees, and coffee beans. The coffee seeds were accompanied by detailed instructions on the type of soil in which they should be planted: “soil like we have in the area behind the fort here in Colombo.” The writers also gratefully acknowledged the receipt of the barrels of salted cabbage and the barrels of red wine which Nicolaas had sent, and wrote to Nicolaas how according to his instruction they had distributed these delicacies among his family and friends. It is clear that all goods were intended to make life more comfortable, on both sides. They were not meant as objects of trade. The letters often ended with long lists of family members and acquaintances who wished to be remembered by Nicolaas. They thus give an intimate picture of an urban elite from Colombo and

⁵WCARS: Annotatie boeck der personen soo van Batavia en Ceijlon alhier aangeland, 1722-57 (see Figure 3-2 on page 115).

Galle, which formed a close-knit network maintained through marriage and mutual support and whose main ambition it was to be in the service of the Dutch East India Company.

As we do not have the letters written by Nicolaas, for information about his life at the Cape we have to draw on passages in the letters in which the correspondents responded to things Nicolaas had written about his circumstances there. In addition, there are some papers written at the Cape furnishing more direct evidence. To begin with, there are the papers concerning the winding up of Nicolaas's estate by the Orphan Chamber. Furthermore, there are some personal papers which Nicolaas seems to have kept in the same file as the letters, such as an IOU related to the purchase of a slave, an IOU concerning money he borrowed less than a month before his death, and a so-called *Memorie Boek* in which he kept track of money borrowed and lent and wrote down the names of the pupils he had taught.

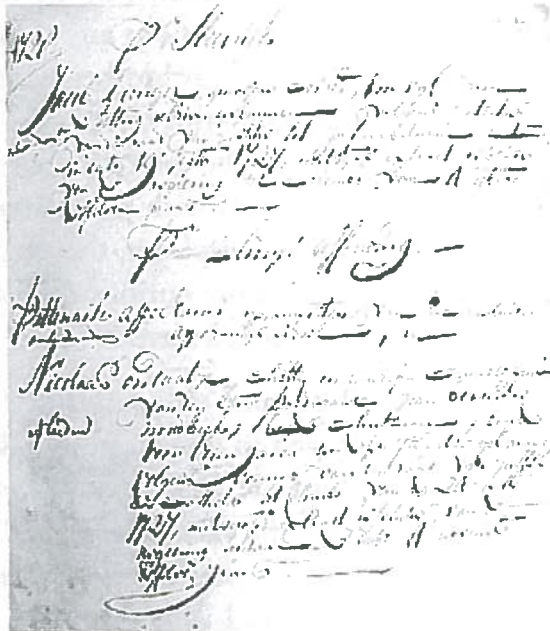


Fig. 3-2:~ Cape mention of Nicolaas Ondaatje

Although technically a convict, Nicolaas was allowed to move about freely.⁶ He had the mobility but not the official status of “*vrijswart*,” or Free Black. For example, he was never listed on the census as were other *vrijswarten*,⁷ nor did he appear on Governor de la Fontaine's 1731 list of all free inhabitants, which included “*Vrijswarten, of ex-bandieten*” although his sentence had not expired.⁸ Nevertheless, he was termed a *vrijswart* in all his probate documents.⁹ Ondaatje's documentation therefore challenges Hans Heese's claim that: “convicts sent from Asia to the Cape or Robben Island, were *not* described as free blacks but as *bandieten*.”¹⁰

⁶Most *bandieten* were confined to specific areas.

⁷See the discussion Richard Elphick and Robert Shell, “A Response to Hans Heese.” *Kronos* 18 (1991): 67-71.

⁸AR, Radermacher Collection, no. 507, Letter of Jan de la Fontaine, 30 January 1732, with appendices.

⁹See for example, MOOC10/4.154

¹⁰[emphasis added] Hans Heese, “Challenging Certain Aspects of Intergroup Relations in *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652 - 1840: A Review Article Kronos* 17 (1990), 74 and note 18.

Nicolaas earned his keep, which at first he seems to have done as a medical doctor and a trader, and subsequently, from 1733 onwards, as a home teacher in Drakenstein, teaching Dutch to the children of the Fouché, Faure [Faurie in original], Haarhoff, Radyn, Malherbe and de Jager families.

In choosing the calling of teaching Nicolaas may well have been inspired by Jan Smiesing, a teacher in the Slave Lodge in Cape Town, whom he appears to have known. Nicolaas lent money to a man named Jan Joosten, who was married to a first cousin of Smiesing, and he was well acquainted with a certain Christiaan Wijnands, who was married to another of Smiesing's cousins.¹¹ It is not unlikely that Nicolaas Ondaatje was the source of the Tamil medical recipes found in a note book from Jan Smiesing, now in the Cape Archives. We know that Nicolaas received two books from his family in Ceylon with medical recipes, along with roots and pills for the preparation of medicines and elaborate advice on how to administer them.¹²

These two books turn up in the inventory of Nicolaas's estate drawn up by the Orphan Chamber after his death in August 1737. Nicolaas died without any direct heirs. While in the letters there is talk of a son born at the Cape—his brother Philip tells him not to be so embarrassed about the fact that he had one—this son probably was not officially acknowledged. Apart from these two books, the estate included only some clothing, some buttons and earrings and some boxes with junk (*rommeling*). As expected of a home teacher who was living with his employer, the estate did not include any furniture or slaves. Therefore it is all the more curious to note that during his ten years at the Cape Nicolaas seems to have needed slaves.

As a Free Black or exile he was permitted to have slaves, but one wonders why he needed them? At first one suspects he may have been engaged in slave-trading. We know that other free blacks at the Cape dealt in slaves at this time. But equally likely he may have been buying exchange slaves for his friends in the slave lodge.¹³ His first slave he bought at the Cape itself. In later years he asked his family to buy them for him in Ceylon and have them sent to him. In what follows I intend to have a closer look at the passages in two letters about these transactions. They make interesting reading, the first one because of the reservations expressed by the correspond-

¹¹See Robert Shell and Archie Dick, "Jan Smiesing, Slave Lodge schoolmaster and Healer, 1697-1734" in *Cape Town. Between East and West*, edited by Nigel Worden (Johannesburg: Jacana Press, 2012), 128-152.

¹²Archie Dick "The Notebook of Johannes Smiesing (1697-1734), Writing and Reading Master in the Cape Slave Lodge" *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa* 64, 4 (2010): 159-174.

¹³Lodge slaves scheduled for manumission had to provide an exchange slave. There has always been a mystery about how these exchange slaves were obtained by lodge slaves themselves.

ent about sending slaves to such a faraway, unknown country, the second one because it includes the report of a near-shipwreck in the harbour of Colombo. In the correspondence there is one more passage about slaves taken from Ceylon to the Cape. In this case Nicolaas was not directly involved. In a letter from 1732 one of the correspondents asked Nicolaas to find out what had happened to a slave woman who had been taken along by Governor Simonsz.¹⁴ in 1708 on his way back to Holland, had been sold by him at the Cape to a Free Burgher and had been manumitted a year later. Nicolaas managed to trace her, upon which she became an important contact person for the correspondent in question in setting up a small-scale trade in wine between the Cape and Ceylon.

Over a year after Nicolaas arrived at the Cape, Johan Bernardus Noordbeek, Ondaatje's former boss (see page 113), is authorized as selling a slave at the Cape on the 11 June 1729, namely Adam van Batavia, on behalf of Jan de Colde de Horn,¹⁵ a bookkeeper in VOC employ in Batavia. There were no ships from Ceylon during this period, but several ships from Batavia, viz. the *Haaksburg*, *Krooswijk*, *Raadhuis van Vlissingen* and the *Purmerlust* arrived late in the season and all left on the 18th June.¹⁶ Several unusual conditions were attached to the sale, viz. the slave was not to be returned to Batavia for ten years and that the buyer should sell the slave at the same price. The buyer at the Cape was Johannes Needer, an assistant in Company employ in Table Valley who had begun his career in Batavia.¹⁷

Among Ondaatje's papers a document is found arranging the payment of 60 *riksdaalders* for a slave Nicolaas had bought a few weeks after the Batavian fleet had left:

Bekenne Ik onderget: voor reek: van Dirk//Wesbergh¹⁸ soldaat in dienst der E.comp: thans bij mijn//oúders in leeningh, ontfangen te hebben úijt handen//van nicolaas o[n]datje van Colombo//sitti¹⁹ een somma van sestigh *rijxdrs*//sprúijtende wegens koop en transport van seekere//jongen genaamt anthonij van bengalen

¹⁴Cornelis Joannes Simons was Governor of Ceylon from 11 May 1703 to 22 November 1707. Prior to this appointment, Simonsz. was Independent Fiscal at the Cape between 1690 and 1694. On his return to Europe in 1708, the Governor-General and Council of the Indies instructed him to act as commissioner to review "the situation at the Cape." *Suid-Afrikaanse Argiefstukke. Kaap no. 3: Resolusies van die Politieke Raad, Deel III, 1681-1707* (Cape Town: Government Printer, 1961), 225; Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 168, fn. 113.

¹⁵No trace of him in the <http://vocopvarenden.nationaalarchief.nl/list.aspx>

¹⁶*Dutch Asiatic Shipping, Voyages: 6756.3; 6757.2; 6758.4; 6759.3*, vol. 3: 292 to 293

¹⁷WCARS: CJ 3079: (11 June 1729) folio 35, no 77.

¹⁸No trace of him in the <http://vocopvarenden.nationaalarchief.nl/list.aspx>

¹⁹*Sitti* is *chetti(ar)*, the name of the caste to which Nicolaas belonged.

//Door den voornoemde dirk wesbergh aan den voor//noemde nicolaas ondatje van Colombo deúgdelijk verkogt//in demneere derhalven bij deesen genoemde Nicolaas//ondatje van Colombo voor namaninge onder verbant als//na regten//Kabo de goede hoop adij 4 Jùlij 1729//N.²⁰ Brommer[t]²¹

An Anthonij of Bengal appears on the domestic slave market on the 31st October 1729 sold by the governor's widow to Albert Diemer for 127 Rixdollars²² but the identification is tenuous.

While it is uncertain what had happened to the slave in question, already in 1730 Nicolaas asked his family to buy two more male slaves for him. The reason he asked for slaves from Ceylon seems to have been that they were much cheaper there, or so Nicolaas seems to have thought, for in a letter from the end of 1731 his elder brother Philip warned him that since he left Ceylon the price of slaves had gone up considerably. It also becomes clear that Philip was not very happy with Nicolaas' request:

Last year you asked us to buy two good slaves, male slaves, and send them to you. If you haven't changed your mind since then, you need not do anything, dear brother. But you should know that while at that time (when you were sent into exile) a slave cost ten *reals*, now you won't get one for less than thirty or forty *reals*, if at all. If that is no problem, there is no need to write to us. However, while we do keep slaves in our homes here, that does not mean that we have no hesitations sending them thither. I hope you understand why.

²⁰N. Brommer is Nicolaas Brommert, son of Jan Brommert and Anna van Schalkwijk, Nicolaas joined the Company in 1725 as assistant, and became a Free Burgher in 1730 (see *Resolutions of the Council of Policy of Cape of Good Hope*, C. 100, pages 40-42, dated 27 August 1736, footnote 6).

²¹A summary: "I, undersigned, acknowledge to have received on behalf of Dirk Wesbergh, soldier in the service of the Company but now on secondment [probably as a *knecht*] living at my parents[']s farm], from Nicolaas Ondaatje from Colombo, Chettiar, the sum of sixty *rijksdaalders* for the sale and transport of a boy [slave] called Anthonij van Bengalen."

²²Cape Town Deeds Office: Transporten en Scheepenkenntnis. 31 October 1729. no pagination.



Wikipedia Commons

Fig. 3-3:~ The Wolvendaal Church in Colombo

The same shape as the Grootte Kerk in Cape Town

learned that Nicolaas had become a teacher as well, had begun a correspondence with him. Due to some circumstances which were elaborately described by him, Domingos Dias failed to get the boy in time on board the ship:

In your letter you asked me to look for a servant. I did find one. After I had agreed to pay 37 *reals* for him I made an advance payment of one *pagoda*. I asked Señor Lopes, the Foreigner, to speak to the captain of a Mocha ship which was about to depart, who next agreed to take the boy on board. It was also agreed that the full sum would be paid to the owner of the boy only after the boy had been taken on board, for in the meantime he might run away and abscond. However, the night before the day we were to bring the boy on board, the ship, called "*De Boot*," was thrown on the beach by a strong north-east wind. But because it was a strong new ship, it did not break. For seven or eight days the employees of the Company in Colombo, Chettiars, Paravars, Moormen, Karaiyars and many others all worked closely together and with a great effort and by the Lord's mercy succeeded in getting the ship afloat again. It was saved without any damage. As the Mocha ship was moving into the direction of Galbokka, making water and tugging at its anchors, moving this way and that, the storm subsided into a gentle breeze. That was how it was saved. However, its *boot* and *schuitje* had broken on the rocks on the beach. Five sailors, who had been in them, drowned. The whole of Colombo grieved as one man. However, the very next day, after the wind had subsided and before I had been able to bring the boy on board as agreed, the captain of the Mocha ship had raised the sails and left.

It is unclear why *De Boot* was called a “Mocha ship” here, as there is no evidence that it ever went to Mocha in Yemen. *De Boot* arrived in Ceylon on 11 November 1736, straight from Rammekens in the province of Zeeland in Holland, which it had left on 3 January of that year. From there it travelled via Batavia and the Cape to Holland, which, however, it would never reach as it sunk in the British Channel on 8 November. The ship reached the Cape only in July 1738, where it remained from 31 July to 12 August 1738. Thus, the boy was lucky to escape transportation, for he would have arrived in Cape Town almost a year after Nicolaas's death.

Why did Nicolaas need slaves? As indicated, his estate of 1737 did not include any slaves. It may be argued that Nicolaas had ordered the boy in 1736 because at the time he happened to be without slaves. At the same time it is possible to argue that Nicolaas required the two male slaves he ordered in 1730 to replace Anthonij van Bengalen, whom he had acquired the year before but who had died soon after. If so, however, his turnover of slaves was strikingly, if not exceptionally, fast. I think that what actually happened is the following. During the first year, or years, of his exile Nicolaas seems to have lived in Cape Town itself. He rented a house for himself, much to the dismay of his mother, who told him not to waste his money on such luxuries; in her opinion a single room should do. Furthermore, his family seems to have given him some money to tide him over the first period of his exile. During his stay in Cape Town Nicolaas moved around in the milieu of Christians, befriending besides Jan Joosten, Christiaan Wijnands and Jan Smiesing.²³

He was clearly confident that he would be able to make a decent living in Cape Town, thinking he could afford a slave. This was Anthonij van Bengalen. Gradually, however, he must have discovered that life as an exile was not that easy. At the same time he cannot have failed to notice the difference in the prices of slaves between the Cape and Ceylon, which remained considerable even after the prices in Ceylon had gone up. Here was an opportunity for him to make some money, namely by using his status as Free Black, which allowed him to own slaves, to import them from Ceylon, ostensibly for himself, but in actual practice with the intention to sell them. It is unclear, however, if Nicolaas made any profit from this enterprise. In any case I doubt if his brother Philip, when asked, would have been prepared to send a second batch of slaves after the first one in 1731.

The slave trade between South and South-East Asia and the Cape was well organised albeit illegal. High ranking ship's officers and repatriating officials brought individual slaves to the Cape and sold them in Cape Town.²⁴ In a postscript to his letter from 1732 the school teacher Domingos Dias asked Nicolaas to find out what had

²³Another Christian free black acquaintance of Nicolaas was Jacobus Hendriksz, from whom he borrowed the sum of five *rijksdaalders*.

happened to a pair of slaves, who had been taken along almost twenty-five years before by Governor Cornelis Johannes Simonsz. to the Cape, where he was to review the situation on behalf of the Council of the Indies:

When Governor Señor Simonsz. was on his way to Holland he sold his servant, named Hannibal, our godson, and his wife, a Bengali woman, named Flora, to a Free Burgher at the Cape. Later, after the Free Burgher had died, the Señor (i.e. Simonsz.), on leaving for Holland, set them free. Afterwards, Hannibal died. After that, that woman Flora married someone else. If I remember well his name was Frans. Flora is a Bengali and very short. Could you find out and let me know if she is still alive. For, when Hannibal was still alive, he sent me a barrel of cabbage. I still have the 10 *reals* with me which I made out of selling the cabbage. Having found out where she lives I could send those ten *reals* to her. Or you could give them directly to her. In that case, you give her the money and ask her to sign a receipt. Send this letter with her signature to your mother here and I will give the money in cash to your mother.

Nicolaas did find Flora. However, her second husband was not called Frans but Carel Jansz. van Bombay. Contact between godfather and godchild was re-established and in all his subsequent letters Domingos Dias asked Nicolaas to pass on orders for one or two barrels of wine to Flora's husband Carel and included money to be paid out to her. Unfortunately, the story, which is almost a fairy tale, does not tell on what grounds Simonsz. managed to get the two slaves, whom he had parted with through the sale, manumitted—the same Simonsz., moreover, who in 1708 was the first to restrict the freedom of Capetonians to manumit their slaves. To prevent the owners from dumping old slaves on the care of the church's poor fund they had to guarantee that the slaves would for the first ten years be able to take care of themselves.

As said, most of the goods sent from Ceylon to the Cape and *vice versa* were meant to make the lives of the recipients more pleasant and comfortable. They did not serve any commercial purpose. For the beneficiaries the small-scale private slave trade belonged to the same category: it gave them a certain measure of financial leeway. At the same time it was uncommon to place oneself in the position of the slaves involved. In this context Philip Ondaatje's voice was exceptional, in that he called upon Nicolaas to compare his own situation as an exile with that of a slave taken

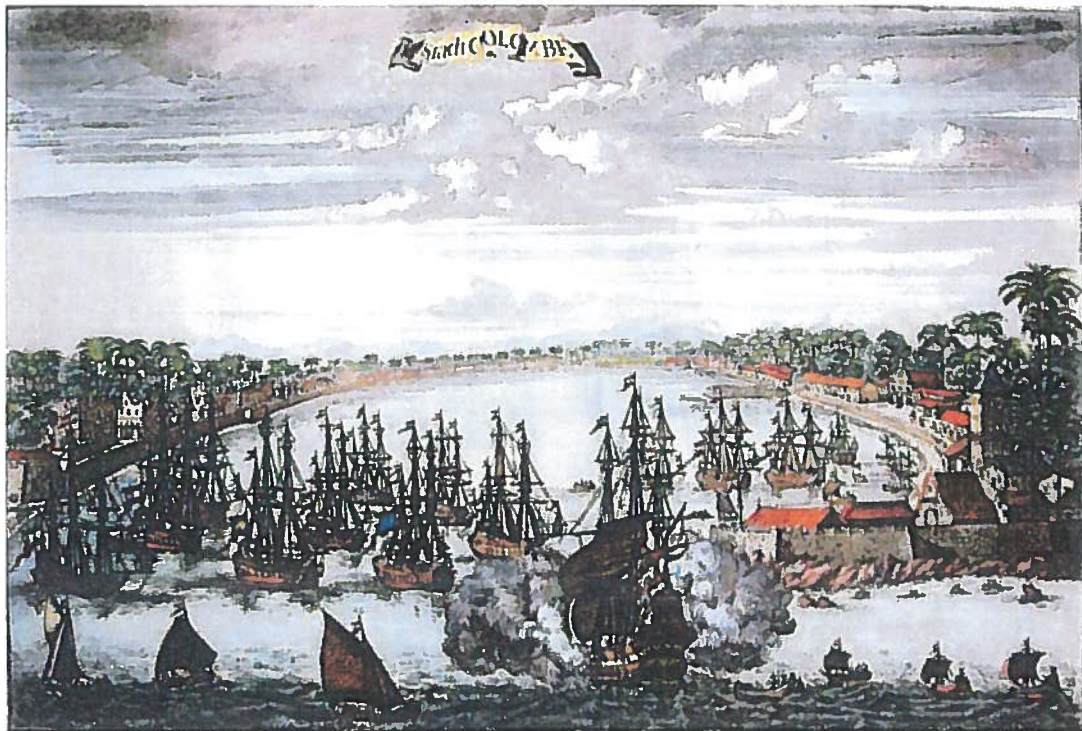
²⁴Robert Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652-1838* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1994), 76.

from his home country to the other end of the world. However, Philip Ondaatje was an exception in other ways as well: he was the only one of the correspondents who responded to the news that Nicolaas had a son, even asking Nicolaas for his name. From his side he proudly informed Nicolaas of the births of his children—one of his letters was written six days after the birth of his daughter—and of the family's moves into ever more spacious houses. Apart from its importance as an historical document, it is precisely this that makes the correspondence so interesting, namely that through all the literary conventions and formulae used by the correspondents in their letter writing it is possible to discern different individuals playing different rôles. For instance, Nicolaas's eldest brother Willem, in the absence of their father, who was no longer alive, played the rôle of a head of the family, giving Nicolaas, *ex cathedra* so to say, permission to wear clothes more suitable to the South African climate than the ones he wore at home in Ceylon. The two younger brothers, Jan and Salomon, are really like schoolchildren writing to an elder brother. Of all the four brothers writing to Nicolaas, Philip seems not only to have been the one closest to him in age but was also the only one to broach more intimate and personal matters and discuss his decisions as an equal.

The correspondence sheds considerable fresh light on the Cape free black community. First, in the status conscious colony, the Cape authorities duly inscribed his caste (*Chettiar*) in his official documents. Second, there seems little doubt that Nicolaas engaged in the oceanic slave trade, although the exact purpose remains obscure. The transactions were made in writing across continents. They were not waterfront transactions. Third, Ondaatje's documents prove that convict/exiles who were to be freed became eligible to be entered into the ranks of free-blacks as Nicolaas' probate documents demonstrate. Fourth, the extensive volume and detail of the correspondence shows how closely knit the Indian Ocean had become, confirming Kerry Ward's work.²⁵ Fifth, although there is a considerable literature on Cape teachers, this teacher has received no mention. Ondaatje also emerges as a medical practitioner well versed in Tamil medicine, possibly the originator of Jan Smiesing's lodge cures. On a personal level, the correspondence also reveals strong familial—especially fraternal—solidarity. When we consider Ondaatje's wide range of activities—in medicine, trade, education—one must conclude that at least some of the neglected free-blacks were active and entrepreneurial members of the Cape community.



²⁵Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colombo> period in Ceylon

Fig. 4-5:~ Dutch Colombo, based on an engraving of circa 1680
 (see article by Herman Tiekens, 113)



Charles Unwin on sea, quarrying site in the national history of South Africa 1912, 21 (2009)
 179 (original P16035), National Maritime Museum, London.

Fig. 4-6:~ Cape schoolroom, circa 1840s
 (see article by Herman Tiekens, 113)