

Connected Lives

Experiences of Slavery in VOC Colomboⁱ

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During the eighteenth century, Dutch Colombo—port town and urban centre—supported a diverse population which included enslaved individuals from regions around the Indian Ocean. Far from being isolated individuals, the enslaved population of Colombo formed bonds of various kinds with fellow enslaved and free people. Using wills, manumission deeds and criminal court records, this chapter teases out the kinds of connections that enslaved people fostered and highlights the importance of specific locations of interaction. What emerges is a series of snapshots of the connected lives of the unfree in eighteenth-century Colombo.

In this period of Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, VOC) rule Colombo was both the gateway to the productive cinnamon-producing hinterland and an important node in VOC networks. Colombo was part of shipping routes, including local trade routes connecting the ports further north and south on the island, and intra-Asian trade networks, specifically enduring networks encompassing the Maldives, Malabar Coast, Madurai District, Coromandel Coast and Bengal. The Company insinuated itself into and reshaped slave trade routes in the Indian Ocean too, as Markus Vink has argued.² During the Company period, then, Colombo had strong shipping connections in the Indian Ocean as well as with the Netherlands, and shared port functions with Galle in the south-west and Jaffna in the north.³

Colombo's shipping patterns and trade position affected the composition of the port's population. Kumari Jayawardena characterizes Lanka before the arrival of European colonists as a "hybrid island", and ethnic mixing continued after the arrival of the Portuguese, and later the Dutch.⁴ The town comprised indigenous population groups, immigrant Asians, European settlers and Company servants; enslaved people too constituted a sizeable share of the

population.⁵ The diversity of the population of the port town led Raben to conclude that in as early as the 1680s “Colombo had become—or rather, had continued to be—the gathering place of foreigners and peoples who occupied an exceptional position in the Sinhalese social (caste) order”.⁶ Many of these people owned slaves who occupied the very lowest rung on the social ladder. To this population was added sporadic influxes of soldiers. In the mid-1760s, during the war with Kandy, “eastern” soldiers were shipped to Colombo from Batavia.⁷ During the 1780s, the time of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, whole regiments were hired from Europe to bolster Colombo’s deficient military. Hundreds of men from the Luxemburg, Württemberg and de Meuron regiments were stationed in Colombo, swelling its population.⁸ Raben comments that “as port cities do, they [Batavia and Colombo] brought together separate worlds in the confined space of the city”.⁹ Within this “confined space”, enslaved men and women established social, sexual, commercial and criminal connections with fellow enslaved individuals and the non-enslaved.

This chapter explores the stories of named individuals who appear in the VOC records of the mid- to late eighteenth century. When one looks for them, the enslaved can be seen in the colonial archive, as Alicia Schrikker and Nira Wickramasinghe discuss in the introduction to this volume. Details of these people’s lives and experiences as enslaved individuals in Colombo can be gleaned from these admittedly challenging institutional sources.¹⁰ Company records are full of references to slavery and enslaved individuals, a handful of whose experiences of bondage and freedom in the town are brought to light in the rest of this chapter. The themes interwoven through these stories are the importance of place, mobility and the different types of connections that the enslaved fostered with each other as well as with non-slaves. The agency of the enslaved underscores these themes. From this reading of the VOC records emerges a reconstruction of some elements of being a slave in the Indian Ocean port town of Colombo.

This analysis builds on work that situates the enslaved firmly within the context of the unfree among whom they lived and laboured, and in connection with an “underclass” of free and unfree individuals. Nigel Worden’s research on sailors in another VOC port town, namely Cape Town, brings to light the interactions between the seamen and enslaved people in locations such as the town’s taverns. They were sites of multi-ethnic interactions, not all of them legal.¹¹ Kerry Ward’s influential book *Networks of Empire* focused on forced migration, and covered the transportation of slaves, convicts and exiles between Batavia and the Cape.¹² Her work brings into a single

framework those people who experienced different forms of bondage—slavery, convict transportation and exile. Matthias van Rossum's work focuses on the various types of workers that the VOC employed in Asia and, in particular, on the numerous Asian workers who were employed by the VOC as, among other things, sailors.¹³ In this rich vein of scholarship, the enslaved population is studied in connection with the other men and women who populated Cape Town, Batavia and other VOC ports and towns of the Indian Ocean littoral. Eric Jones' work focuses specifically on enslaved women, mainly those who lived and laboured in Batavia, whose intimate connections with men in the city, he argues, provided opportunities for social mobility; through intimate ties some enslaved women achieved status and escaped slavery.¹⁴ In contrast to the Cape and Batavia, little research has been done on the history of slavery in VOC Ceylon (as the Company called the island of Sri Lanka in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). This chapter takes up the task of bringing to light some aspects of what being a slave in VOC Colombo was like in the eighteenth century.

Interaction in the town

In 1794, a criminal case involving numerous characters came before the Council of Justice. The statements provided by the accused and by witnesses were extremely detailed; they offer a window into understanding the connections between free and unfree people in the town, and provide insight into where these interactions took place. What emerges is a network of multiple and repeated interactions around sites of labour and petty commerce.

The accused in the case were three men of different legal status.¹⁵ Amber was an enslaved man owned by the vice-mudliar of the Atapattu, Christoffel de Saram.¹⁶ His accomplice, Troena de Wangso, was described in the court papers as Javanese, originating from Damak. He had been found guilty of a crime in Batavia and sentenced to transportation, arriving in Colombo as a convict in 1784. He was sent to the *materiaalhuis*, which must have functioned as a workhouse or prison, but he absconded from there in March 1793.¹⁷ The third accused in the case was a free Sinhalese man named Andries who had managed to escape.¹⁸ The social networks which brought together a slave, a transported convict and a free Sinhalese man and provided them with the opportunity to sell or pawn the goods they stole will be highlighted through the story of the burglary and subsequent events.

The very detailed statement which Troena de Wangso provided for the court—the candour of which the fiscal (public prosecutor) attributed to his hope of receiving a lighter sentence¹⁹—gives insight into the locations where the three accused met and the places where they tried to sell the stolen goods. Four sites of interaction are noteworthy for different reasons. The first is the *materiaalhuis* where the enslaved man Amber and the convict Troena de Wangso had been detained, and where they had become acquainted before committing the crime together. The details of why Amber had been working there were not revealed in the case.

The second important location in the case was Wolvendaal Church (see map: the church is marked “d”). It was there that Amber and Troena de Wangso reconnected and hatched the plot to rob Simon Gomes Nella Tambij, the head of the silversmiths in the town. According to the court papers, Troena de Wangso had been begging at the church when he and Amber met. Why Amber was at the church is unclear, but his presence may be an indicator of relative mobility for an enslaved man, or that he disregarded the regulations and surveillance that were intended to limit his freedom of movement.

The third location relevant to the case was a tavern where Amber and Troena de Wangso recruited the third accused, the free Sinhalese man, Andries.²⁰ At taverns slaves could not only mingle with others, but they could also drink, gamble and make contracts. In as early as the 1660s, the number of taverns in Colombo was restricted by ordinance, in response to the exponential growth in the number of public houses and the concomitant rise in feuds and alcoholic excess. Theoretically, there could be only two taverns in the fort and five in the town.²¹ Not only was the number of taverns limited, but conduct within them was regulated via ordinances which attempted to restrict slaves’ access to alcohol and limit social interaction in the city’s bars.²² Despite the prohibition, Amber and Troena went to talk to Andries in a bar, and the case records include the detail that they had seen him there before, locating all three men in the tavern at the same time on at least two occasions.²³

Taverns in Colombo were not unique in their function as sites of interaction. Geelen et al.’s chapter in this volume highlights the importance of a tavern in Cochin as the enslaved man Cruz’s place of work beyond the scrutiny of his owner, as well as the place at which he could interact with others. Looking across the Indian Ocean, Nigel Worden’s work on the Cape Town “underclass” brings taverns, and the interactions that took place there, into

sharper focus. In taverns “visiting crewmen encountered the whole range of Cape Town’s diverse underclass”, which included those residing in the town and the surrounding areas, as well as temporary visitors from the VOC and from foreign ships in the harbour. Among those who would have spent time in the taverns, Worden includes soldiers, Company artisans, slaves, free blacks, Chinese traders, convicts, ex-convicts, burghers and free settlers.²⁴ It is quite likely that Colombo taverns played a similar role, as meeting places for the free and unfree, and for Colombo’s residents and visitors.

Finally, the case of theft against Amber, Troena de Wangso and Andries brings to the fore sites of commerce and exchange. The case shows that individuals interacted in the streets, in the market, and in homes where food and drink, and—crucial to this case—stolen goods were sold. The case unravelled when Aliaar, a young Muslim man (denoted as “Moor” in the records), tried to fence a copper dish in the streets. The dish had been stolen from Simon Gomes, whose neighbour recognized Aliaar’s goods as stolen property.²⁵ It turned out that Aliaar had acquired the bowl from his brother, a soldier named Sinne Wapoe, who had purchased the dish from Louisa Zose, a woman who sold rice from her home. Sinne Wapoe claimed that when he was out selling tea one afternoon Louisa had shown him the copper bowl and had asked him if he wanted to buy it, and that they had concluded the transaction near Wolvendaal Church.²⁶ Louisa, however, recounted a conflicting story—she claimed that Sinne Wapoe had bought the bowl from the thief himself, Troena de Wangso. In her statement, Louisa confirmed that the three men, Troena de Wangso, Amber and Andries, visited her home one night and, on that occasion, Troena had had the copper basin with him. Louisa’s statement thus tied the three men to each other and to the physical evidence. Moreover, while answering the fiscal’s questions, she revealed connections between the men quite separate from their collusion in the crime. Louisa sold cooked rice from her home and, as a result of this business, she knew the convict and accused, Troena de Wangso, who was one of her customers. Moreover, she was acquainted with the slave Amber because he owed her money for past purchases.²⁷ Troena de Wangso then confirmed that Sinne Wapoe had purchased the copper bowl from him. Together, the three men had gone to Louisa’s house on the way to Sinne Wapoe’s home in the *Moorsche Straat* (probably located in the Muslim Quarter, the *Moorsche Quartier*, marked “p” on the map), where Wapoe bought the dish from Troena de Wangso.²⁸ In contrast

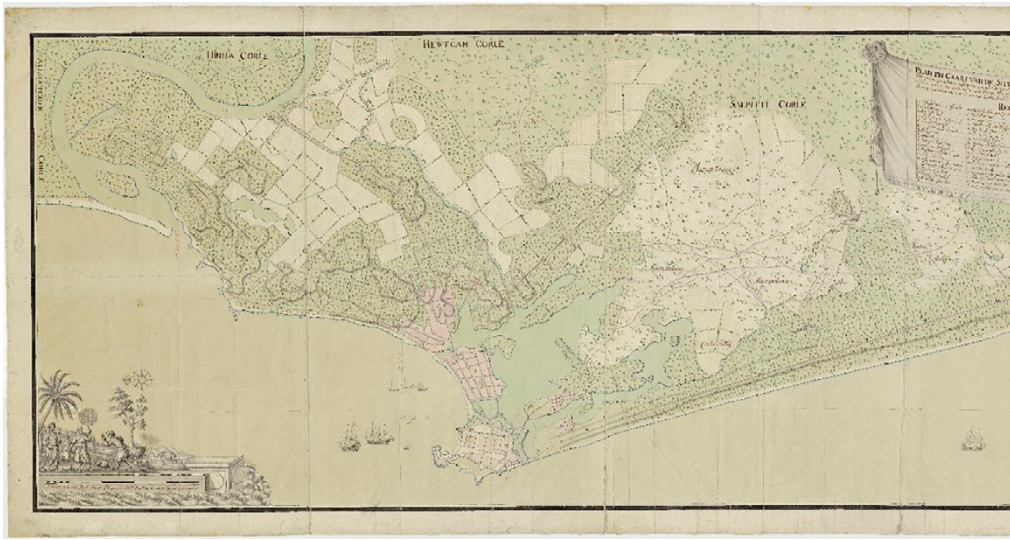


Figure 4.1. Late eighteenth-century map of Colombo.

Source: National Archives, The Hague, Verzameling Buitenlandse Kaarten Leupe, Archive number 4. VEL, Inventory number 953.

to Troena de Wangso's detailed statement, the slave Amber claimed, or feigned, ignorance of the crime. He denied everything, including his association with Troena and Andries.²⁹

From the case records we catch a glimpse of the places where the three men interacted and hatched their criminal plans—the *materiaalhuis*, the area around Wolvendaal Church, and a tavern. After they robbed Simon Gomes, they tried to fence the goods; in the process, they interacted with free people such as the soldier Sinne Wapoe and the rice seller Louisa, with whom they and Sinne Wapoe had had pre-existing commercial connections. More than just indicating the extent to which free and unfree people interacted, this reading of the court records shows the nature of those interactions and the localities in which they took place. This case suggests that some slaves exercised relative autonomy, at least to the extent of leaving the master's house and having the (relative) freedom to determine their own movements during the day and at night.

A case of theft committed by an enslaved woman named Lizarde and her accomplice, a free Sinhalese boy named Christiaan, reinforces the idea that enslaved and free people mingled (relatively) freely in certain spaces in



Figure 4.2. Detailed map of Colombo. The register lists *a* as the Castle, *d* as Wolvendaal Church, *p* as the Muslim Quarter (*Moorsche Quartier*, probably the location of the *Moorsche Straat*), and *r* as the Company slaves' quarter. Source: National Archives, The Hague, Verzameling Buitenlandse Kaarten Leupe, Archive number 4. VEL, Inventory number 953.

VOC port towns. It was alleged that over a period of months Lizarde and Christiaan had stolen an astonishing number of things from the house left in their care.³⁰ While the list of goods provides a fascinating insight into the varied contents of a late eighteenth-century household, more importantly the case provides information on the extensive networks through which Lizarde and Christiaan fenced the goods.

According to the various case documents, Lizarde and Christiaan pawned or sold the stolen goods to a variety of people, including the barkeeper (*schagger/tapper*) of De Prins, Jacob Berarda of Genoa; the flagman; a Javanese woman, Paatma; a manumitted slave, Joana, who was born in Tranquebar;

the concubine of the slave Lakij who belonged to a Mr van Hek; the under-surgeon's widow, Engeltina Hopman; her sister, Debora; and the "Moor" Slema Lebbe Sultan, *kannekapul* (scribe) of the *materiaalhuis*. The crime and the initial criminal proceedings took place in Galle, but the proceedings were later transferred to the Council of Justice of Colombo, highlighting on the one hand the social networks established by Lizarde and Christiaan and, on the other, that such networks among slaves and free people were not limited to the larger settlement of Colombo.

The statements of the accused and witnesses provide incidental information that reveals that slaves enjoyed relative freedom of movement around the city and had the time and opportunity to establish friendships and acquaintances, some of which turned criminal. While slaves could of course establish connections easily with the slaves of the same household, the records also show that there were a number of specific places where connections between free and unfree people could be established. The cases show that enslaved individuals mingled with free people in the streets, buying and selling various goods³¹ and visiting their neighbours.³² The market was another area that gave slaves the opportunity to interact with other slaves and free people. The market in Batavia features prominently in the narratives of runaway slave women analysed by Eric Jones—plans were hatched there.³³ Similarly, slaves in the Cape were street vendors, hawking various goods including food, and in doing so creating a mobile market.³⁴ In theory, the Statutes of Batavia limited the interaction of slaves by prohibiting gatherings of three or more slaves, setting curfews and banning slaves from taverns.³⁵ However, as in the case of Troena de Wangso, Amber and Andries in Colombo, the streets and taverns of Cape Town were sites of interaction between soldiers, sailors, artisans, freed people and the enslaved.³⁶ In Colombo, as in other VOC port towns, the enslaved made use of the opportunities presented by some degree of (geographic) mobility.

Intimate ties and intimate violence

It is unsurprising that enslaved individuals were connected to others, both enslaved and free, through intimate ties. Yet these ties are not always very clearly visible in the archive. Dutch colonial institutions' records reveal little detail about sexual relationships and kinship connections: there are often gaps regarding enslaved people's agency in general, and individuals' choices

in particular. The records are veiled windows—they provide glimpses into the complications of everyday life rather than neat patterns and trajectories. In her thoughtful and nuanced introduction to *Sex, Power and Slavery*, Elizabeth Elbourne writes:

Silences mark the history of sexuality, reflecting both lacunae in historical records and the hush surrounding certain sexual practices in many times and places. Silences can be read, but to do so often requires resort to unconventional types of source material as well as recognition of the fact that not all silences (such as the frequent silences of enslaved women) can be filled with confidence.³⁷

Elbourne also emphasizes the importance of not reducing the history of slavery and sexuality to relations between master and slave or to a history of rape. In line with this, and with due regard for the silences of the archive, I consider a wide range of sexual relations including, where possible, between enslaved people.³⁸

Broadly speaking, we can identify two types of relationships, namely those among enslaved people and those between enslaved and free people. The criminal case discussed below mentions an instance of the former as an incidental detail in a murder case. The latter, namely sexual relationships between enslaved and free people, can be read back in a small number of wills and manumission deeds which detail the relationships between heirs and the deceased, and slave owners and the manumitted, respectively. Ordinances issued against concubinage (cohabitation outside marriage) provide the Company's point of view on enslaved people's relationships and allow us to get to the crux of the Company's concerns. Taken together, these different types of institutional sources reveal the sexual and kinship connections which constituted a significant part of the lived experience of slavery in Colombo.

In late 1770 and early 1771, four enslaved individuals were mentioned in the Dutch criminal records in connection with a murder—the victim, the perpetrator and two witnesses to the crime. All four individuals were counted among the nearly 400 Company-owned slaves in Colombo.³⁹ It seems that they lived at the VOC's *materiaalhuis* in the city, which was the locus of the violent events that unfolded. The accused was Apollo van Makassar, denoted in the records as “an eastern slave boy” and a Malay speaker.⁴⁰ The toponym Makassar indicates that at some point in his life he was sold and transported

from the slave markets in Makassar (on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi), or possibly that he was Makassarese.⁴¹ Apollo's victim was a fellow Company slave, Moeijer Plema—possibly also a man of Southeast Asian origin, as he too understood Malay. The court records state that Apollo spoke to Moeijer Plema in Malay, while an enslaved woman named Diana witnessed this exchange. Apollo referred to Diana as his *vrouw* (wife), according to the report of Apollo's interrogation, but the Dutch authorities used *bijzit* (concubine) to categorize their relationship.⁴² The fourth enslaved person mentioned in the court documents was a man named Christoffel Moettoe—a Company-owned slave, the *materiaalhuis* scribe, and a Colombo-born Catholic, who was about 27 years old at the time of the crime.⁴³ Interestingly, he provided a witness statement to the court, which he solemnised with an oath and signed with his own hand.⁴⁴

The *mandoor* (overseer) of the Company-owned enslaved people living in the *materiaalhuis* was a man from the Dutch city of Hoorn, Johannes Wijnbergen. He was about 30 years old and declared himself a Catholic.⁴⁵ In the statement he gave to the court he indicated that he was on watch when he heard Apollo van Makassar and Apollo's *bijzit* Diana approach Moeijer Plema and speak in Malay. Wijnbergen suspected a fight would brew between the two men, and so he went to his room to fetch a *rotting* (cane). The next thing he heard was Diana screaming that one of the two men, Apollo or Moeijer Plema, was carrying a knife (*krits/kris*). Apollo stabbed Moeijer Plema multiple times, inflicting wounds which proved fatal.⁴⁶ According to the surgeon's report on his inspection of the body, Moeijer Plema died of the ten stab wounds that Apollo inflicted.⁴⁷

As in other murder cases, the motives for the attack did not interest the VOC authorities.⁴⁸ While we cannot be sure, it is possible that the relationship between Apollo and Diana was the reason for the conflict between the two men—perhaps the men fought over Apollo's wife/concubine, Diana, as it happened at the VOC Cape.⁴⁹

The distinction between *vrouw* and *bijzit* is apparent in the VOC's Cape Town records too—women who were referred to by enslaved men as their wives were labelled concubines by the Company. At the Cape, until 1823 enslaved people were not allowed to marry in a legal ceremony recognized by the church and authorities.⁵⁰ That enslaved people were precluded from marriage recognized by their owners and the authorities did not of course stop them from forming such relationships and, as Cape and Colombo records attest, from referring to one another as husband and wife.

Such relationships are often only fleetingly visible in the Company records. One family of enslaved people, spanning three generations, is revealed in manumission deeds. An enslaved woman named Bintang was manumitted in November 1794, along with her mother, Alida, and her children, Kassim and Patra. A later manumission deed reveals the identity of her husband, the father of her children—a man named Spadilje. The family members had all been owned and manumitted by the same man, Johan Gerard van Angelbeek.⁵¹ Familial ties were also recorded in wills. Slave families made visible in official records include Bootje and Samia, a couple manumitted by testament in 1784, and the enslaved man Orendatius, his wife Maria, and their young daughter Susana who similarly entered the Company records when they were promised manumission by testament of Daniel Ternooij in 1782.⁵² Five individuals who formed one family, consisting of Maart, his wife Aspatie and their three children—Ismael, Rebecca and Christoffel—were promised manumission by testament.⁵³ The slaves Floris, Lisie, Bastiaan and Maria, “being husband, wife and two children”, were named as beneficiaries in a will—the family stood to inherit property as well as 300 *rijksdaalders* (Rds) from their owner.⁵⁴ These families who began their life after slavery with some property might have had some resilience against the precariousness of manumitted status.⁵⁵

Relative to the (in)visibility of enslaved family units in the colonial archive, there are abundant references to slave mothers and their children. This stems from slavery being a condition inherited through the maternal line—the legal status of the mother as slave or free determined the status of her child. As I discuss below, the VOC’s concerns about concubinage involving enslaved people revolved around the legal status of the children from such relationships and, by extension, the Company’s labour force.

The VOC’s regulations regarding concubinage were framed as religious concerns and explicitly regulated relationships between men and women of different religions. The Company sorted the inhabitants of Colombo into four religious categories—Christian, Roman Catholic, Muslim and Heathen. Company regulations prohibited concubinage between individuals of different religions, and threatened corporal punishment and hard labour on Company works for those who were caught.⁵⁶ Prohibitions of concubinage of an enslaved person raised religious concerns, but were probably subordinate to considerations of, crudely put, asset accumulation and provision of labour. The VOC followed the principle that “the fruit follows the womb”; that is, the child inherits the legal status of the mother. The application of this principle

meant that the child of an enslaved woman was also considered a slave, but that the child of a free woman was free. In the case of a concubinage relationship between an enslaved man and free woman, the child, like the mother, would be free. The Company perceived this as a loss to private slave owners as well as to itself. Thus, against the “fruit follows the womb” principle, a 1704 ordinance against concubinage (reissued in 1732) declared that the child of a free woman and a Company slave man would in fact be enslaved. The ordinances reveal not only the Company’s concerns, but also the choices that enslaved people were making regarding intimate relationships.

The 1704 ordinance attempted to regulate sexual relationships between enslaved and free people and establish the legal status of children from such unions. It was a response to what the VOC considered to be changing patterns in relationships involving Company-owned slave men. Enslaved men owned by the VOC, and in particular those who were skilled, had stopped following the “usual custom” of choosing a partner from among the enslaved women owned by the Company. The relationship between Apollo van Makassar and Diana is an example of the “usual custom”. But other men made other choices; the Company noted that skilled slave men chose to form relationships with free and freed women (manumitted slaves), with whom they lived in “a sort of concubinage and fornication”. Children born of these relationships were born free and inherited the free status of their mothers. This was the crux of the matter for the Company. Thus, the VOC authorities forbade Company-owned enslaved men from living “as man and wife or in concubinage” with free women, and ordered that they choose their “wives or concubines” from among the Company-owned enslaved women. The Company’s desire to protect its own property, in the form of slaves, is clearly demonstrated by the addition of a prohibition against Company slave men forming relationships with privately owned slave women, as the children of such unions would have been considered the property of the private slave owner, not the Company.⁵⁷

Having set out the regulations, the Company then detailed the punishment for those caught contravening them. Free women—the ordinance mentioned *inlandse* (inland, or Ceylonese) women in particular—caught in concubinage with slave men would have their hair cut off and be made to labour in chains for three years. The children born to these women of slave men would be declared the property of the Company.⁵⁸

The Company considered it necessary to reissue the ordinance in the early 1730s. The context of the 1732 ordinance prohibiting concubinage

between enslaved and free people was the growth in the number of free people who had taken up residence in the slave quarters (marked *r* on the map) just outside the Rotterdammer Poort. Free and enslaved were living together in that area, much to the Company's chagrin. Thus, it ordered all free people, manumitted slaves and privately-owned slaves to move out of the slave quarters; if they refused they would be punished. Following the order, the 1704 ordinance against concubinage was reissued.⁵⁹ That reissue indicates that the Company had not succeeded in its efforts to re-establish the "usual custom" of Company slaves forming sexual relationships with one another rather than with free and freed people in the city.

The Company's concerns, as revealed in the ordinances prohibiting concubinage, were specifically related to the accumulation of human property—their future labourers in the form of the children of such unions. The Company was not against concubinage *per se*, but forbade concubinage relationships from which it could not profit.⁶⁰ Moreover, these regulations, as well as others concerning the marriages of free people, can be seen as examples of the VOC's attempts to extend its jurisdiction over people and reinforce its sovereignty, and to maintain social control in order to extract labour from free and unfree population groups.⁶¹

While I have used Company ordinances to shed light on concubinage involving Company-owned enslaved men, other Company documents shed light on the relationships between enslaved women and free men. Sexual relationships between enslaved women and the men who owned them have been recorded in wills and manumission deeds. These sources indicate that relationships existed and that some existed for decades. But what the sources often do not reveal is the trauma, duress and power dynamics associated with at least some such relationships. Consent is not something we can decipher in this type of historical document. For at least two enslaved women, the relationships they had with their slave masters were of great consequence to their legal status. The wills and manumission deeds in which they were named indicate that concubinage between the enslaved woman and slave master had been a route to manumission for these two women and their children. In this regard, these two women's lives echoed processes of mobility and opportunity in VOC port cities like Batavia and Cape Town, and on another island, Mauritius.⁶²

In 1782, Gerrardus Cornelis Kersse drew up his last will. In naming his heirs and dividing up his possessions, he mentioned a number of slaves and manumitted slaves, and in doing so revealed a family unit which comprised

enslaved and free people, alike. The first important beneficiary named in his will was Silvia Vilanders. Kersse left her the sum of 50 Rds, together with three trunks. A far larger inheritance was left to Kersse's "natural daughter", Susanna Cornelia Kersse, who, he states, was born to him of the former slave Silvia. While it is not spelt out in the will, it is most likely that while Silvia was working for Kersse as a slave they began some sort of sexual relationship, and as a result Kersse decided to manumit her. It is possible that she was already pregnant when manumitted, or she may have had the child at a later stage during their liaison. As there is no tag relating to slavery attached to young Susanna, her mother was probably free at the time of her birth.⁶³

A manumission deed from August 1738 records the relationship between Frans Gomes and the four slaves who formed his immediate family. He manumitted the slave woman Rosetta who was his concubine, as well as their three children, Louisa, Agida and Elisabeth. The children are described as "procreated by the deponent".⁶⁴ Clearly, the relationship between Frans and Rosetta was an enduring one, but the individuals involved appear in the VOC records only briefly.

For Silvia and Rosetta, a sexual relationship with their master meant a route to freedom and an inheritance for themselves and their children. What remains undiscoverable is how these two women experienced that relationship while still enslaved, and how the relationship between each woman and her respective master changed after manumission. Consent cannot be read in these stories with any kind of clarity.

Consent was the issue under scrutiny in a unique rape case which was heard by the Council of Justice in the closing years of Company rule in Colombo. An enslaved woman named Tamar accused a European soldier of raping her.⁶⁵ By doing so she asserted ownership of her own body in a powerful way, challenging the core of chattel slavery according to which her body was not her own. In a classic he said/she said the accused claimed that intercourse had been consensual, and he told the court that he had left Tamar some coins on the assumption that the enslaved woman was prostituting herself.⁶⁶ Tamar's accusation led to legal proceedings which included calling a witness, an enslaved man named Lindor, who lived a few houses away from where Tamar lived with her master. That the fiscal pursued the case against the soldier, Laborde, was more likely a function of the identity of the accused than the Dutch authorities' concern with justice for an enslaved woman. Pierre Laborde was a soldier in the de Meuron regiment—one of three regiments of European soldiers hired by the VOC to protect their position

on Lanka in the face of British hostilities. The soldiers were notorious,⁶⁷ so the VOC is likely to have seen the accusation as an opportunity to set an example, tighten its grip on the regiment, and enforce Company authority and order. If this was indeed the case, we can imagine that Laborde would have been convicted, but we cannot know this as the outcome of the case brought by Tamar against Laborde has been lost.⁶⁸

Enslaved women who lived and laboured in VOC settlements and towns across the Indian Ocean were subject to sexual abuse from slave masters, slave masters' sons and free men.⁶⁹ Tamar's story is unique in the Colombo archive, not because abuse did not happen in the society of that time but, tragically, because it was often not considered as such by the authorities. Rape was one aspect of the range of abuses, the "intimate violence" which enslaved women suffered at the hands of men, both slave and free.⁷⁰

Despite the silences in the archive, various VOC sources shed faint light on the sexual and kinship relations through which, by choice or coercion, the enslaved in Colombo were connected to free and unfree people in the town. These connections, as well as the social, criminal and commercial ties explored in the first section, embedded the enslaved in the locality, as Alicia Schrikker and I claim elsewhere.⁷¹ Zooming out from Colombo, the following section briefly explores more abstract connections beyond the island itself.

Connections across the ocean

So far, this chapter has focused on connections contained within the space of Colombo. But there are indications in the archive that these social, commercial, sexual and familial ties were not the only ones that shaped the experience of bondage on the island. An avenue for further research is to understand the ways in which ideas of a world beyond the island shaped experiences of bondage on it. Archival documents point to religious connections and Dutch institutional connections that contributed to two women's experiences of enslaved life on Lanka.

The enslaved woman Deidamie carried a talisman with her, the origin of which can be traced to a Muslim priest in Batavia. Deidamie received the talisman from a fellow Malay slave, who received it from a Malay soldier from Java who lived in Colombo; the soldier received the talisman from a priest in Batavia, by which the soldier presumably meant a religious leader in the Muslim community there. Schrikker and I point out that following the

talisman's trajectory reveals the kinds of connections established by enslaved individuals in Colombo, and we suggested that Deidamie may have carried the talisman with her as a signifier of her sense of belonging to a community of co-religionists beyond the island.⁷²

The case of a woman named Helena, who was involved in a dispute over her own status as slave or free, reveals similarly wide-ranging connections, but of a different kind. Schrikker and I argue that Helena was aware of the international scope of Dutch institutions, which came to light in her statement of intent to pursue her case beyond Colombo, taking it to the Company authorities in Batavia. Helena was aware of a Dutch legal institutional world which tied Colombo and Ceylon more generally to the VOC's Indian Ocean world.⁷³

These women's connections beyond the island widen our view—from close relationships among individuals in Colombo, we zoom out to experiences or awareness of the networked nature of the VOC empire which, as Kerry Ward has argued, was constituted by webs and circuits, including important routes of forced migration along which enslaved people, convicts and exiles were transported.⁷⁴ Deidamie and Helena, it seems, were aware of this wider connected world which they occupied. Further research will bear out the suggestion that these are two examples among many of connected lives across the oceans.

Conclusion

The Dutch East India Company records reveal, somewhat incidentally, that slaves maintained wide-ranging connections in Colombo which involved fellow enslaved as well as free people. Sometimes the records reveal long-lasting relationships, for instance, the sexual relationship between Rosetta and her master which led to Rosetta's and their children's manumission; other records offer fleeting glimpses of repeated interactions between enslaved people and free citizens, such as among those buying rice from the free woman Louisa Zose at her home, or Andries, Amber and Troena de Wangso meeting in a tavern. The interactions that come to the fore in the records are the social, sexual, commercial and criminal interactions between slaves and free people in Colombo. For some, ideas or awareness of cross-oceanic connections—religious or legal—add a non-local dimension to experiences of bondage.

But what were the implications of living connected lives in the town? First, sexual interactions between slaves and free people, and between people of different ethnic backgrounds created a legacy of mixed ancestry.⁷⁵ The agency of enslaved people is very much part of this story, but it is also important to take the silences in the archive seriously, particularly around the issue of consent in sexual relationships between individuals in vastly different positions of power. Second, the connected lives we see in the VOC records lead us to the conclusion that at least some slaves in Colombo experienced relative freedom, inasmuch as they were able to determine who they interacted with and where, beyond the master's household. Here, again, the agency of the enslaved is foregrounded. The case of theft involving Andries, Amber and Troena de Wangso allows us to locate various interactions between enslaved and free people around the town. This contributes further nuance to the spectrum of lived experiences that people within the legal category of slave were exposed to. Yet, as a note of warning, scholars should remain wary of conflating connections, interactions and solidarity, since cooperation in crimes and the connected lives of the enslaved did not necessarily constitute solidarity among an “underclass”. Andries, Amber and Troena de Wangso were after all apprehended by enslaved men and then handed over to the fiscal—an occurrence that was also common at the Cape. Finally, recovering micro-level, individual stories of the enslaved in Colombo goes some way in countering the silences of the past. Reading the archives for details of the social, sexual, commercial and criminal interactions between enslaved people and free people in Colombo greatly enriches our understanding of enslaved people's experience of bondage in this part of the Indian Ocean world.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on research conducted in the Sri Lankan Department of National Archives with the generous funding of Leiden University's Encompass programme. An earlier version was presented at the Leiden Slavery Studies Association's international conference in 2016, and at the National Archives of the Netherlands' *Rethinking the Dutch East India Company?* symposium in 2017. Thanks go to the participants for their feedback. I am grateful to the editors of this volume as well as to the peer reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.

2. Markus Vink, "'The World's Oldest Trade': Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of World History* 14, no. 2 (2003): 131-177.
3. Remco Raben, "Batavia and Colombo: The Ethnic and Spatial Order of Two Colonial Cities, 1600-1800" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 1996): 45-46.
4. Kumari Jayawardena, *Erasure of the Euro-Asians: Recovering Early Radicalism and Feminism in South Asia*, 19. Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2007.
5. Raben, "Batavia and Colombo," 5. While the population composition of Batavia and Colombo was similar, absolute numbers were very different—Colombo had a much smaller population. Knaap's analysis of census data shows that the enslaved made up a considerable proportion of the Colombo population at the close of the seventeenth century: Gerrit Knaap, "Europeans, Mestizos and Slaves: The Population of Colombo at the End of the Seventeenth Century," *Itinerario* 5 no. 2 (1981): 84-101.
6. Raben, "Batavia and Colombo," 103.
7. *Ibid.*, 110.
8. *Ibid.* On the role of de Meuron himself in the closing decades of the eighteenth century see Alicia Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka C. 1780-1815: Expansion and Reform*, 131-141. Leiden and Boston MA: Brill, 2006.
9. Raben, "Batavia and Colombo," 43. See Jayawardena, *Erasure of the Euro-Asians*, 32-33, for a description of the Swiss de Meuron regiment and its legacy in the burgher population of Colombo.
10. On court cases as sources and the incidental detail of lived experience revealed in those sources see Nigel Worden and Gerald Groenewald, "Introduction," in *Trials of Slavery: Selected Documents Concerning Slaves from the Criminal Records of the Council of Justice at the Cape of Good Hope, 1705-1794*, edited by Nigel Worden and Gerald Groenewald, xi-liv. Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 2005. Worden and Groenewald discuss the presence of the enslaved in terms of hearing rather than seeing them in the archive, noting that for the Cape in particular court cases are where we hear the voices of the enslaved most clearly, yet even then mediated through layers of power and translation. The problems and potential of court cases as historical sources are also dealt with in the chapter by Geelen et al. in this volume.
11. Nigel Worden, "Strangers Ashore: Sailor Identity and Social Conflict in Mid-18th Century Cape Town," *Kronos* 33 (2007): 72-83.
12. Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

13. Matthias van Rossum, *Werkers van de Wereld. Globalisering, arbeid en interculturele ontmoetingen tussen Aziatische en Europese zeelieden in dienst van de VOC, 1600-1800*. Hilversum: Verloren, 2014.
14. Eric Jones, *Wives, Slaves and Concubines: A History of the Female Underclass of Dutch Asia*. DeKalb IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010. See also Eric Jones, "Fugitive Women: Slavery and Social Change in Early Modern Southeast Asia," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 38, no. 2 (2007): 215-245.
15. All documents relating to the case were bound and are available at the Sri Lankan Department of National Archives (SLNA), *Archives of the Dutch Central Government of Coastal Ceylon, 1640-1796*, Lot 1/4740, criminal dossiers, ff. 1r-36v. The dossier consists of a statement by the complainant, Simon Gomes Nella Tambij; seven witness reports; statements given by both of the accused; a note regarding Troena's convict past; and the fiscal's *eijsch* (suggested punishment). Discussion of the case is based on the analysis in my unpublished MA thesis: Kate Ekama, "Slavery in Dutch Colombo: A Social History" (Leiden University, unpublished ResMA thesis, 2012).
16. SLNA 1/4740, f. 21r.
17. *Ibid.*, ff. 18r, 26r. Damak most likely refers to Demak in central Java.
18. *Ibid.*, f. 33r.
19. *Ibid.*, f. 29v.
20. *Ibid.*, f. 18v.
21. Raben, "Batavia and Colombo," 33. The ordinance is included in Lodewijk Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek: Plakkaten En Andere Wetten Uitgevaardigd Door Het Nederlandse Bestuur Op Ceylon, 1638-1796*, I, 145. 2 vols., Hilversum: Verloren, 1991 [Ordinance number 98].
22. *Ibid.*, I: 191 [26]; II: 590-91 [417]; II: 591 note 20.
23. SLNA 1/4740, f. 18v.
24. Worden, "Strangers Ashore," 77.
25. This echoes the importance of neighbours in the apparatus of informal surveillance which Geelen et al. highlight in their chapter.
26. SLNA 1/4740, f. 10r.
27. *Ibid.*, ff. 6v, 13r, 14v.
28. *Ibid.*, f. 12r.
29. *Ibid.*, ff. 21r-v.
30. Lizarde's owner, Albertus Hissink, had gone to Mature, and his wife had gone to the village of Madampe to recover from an illness. Hissink left Lizarde and Christiaan in charge while he and his wife were away. SLNA 1/4702, criminal dossiers, ff. 31r-v, Articles 1 and 2.

31. Street vending was allowed in Colombo, but market stalls were confined to specific areas: Raben, "Batavia and Colombo," 31.
32. For instance, Louisa Zose established various contacts through her business of selling cooked rice; Sinne Wapoe surely did the same through selling tea. Amber, Troena and Andries went to Louisa's house to ask for fire and, in a different case, the slave woman Tamar went to a neighbour's house to ask for a kettle of water. Moreover, the case against Lizarde records her interaction with her master's neighbour. See SLNA 1/4740, ff. 13r, 14v, 10r, 6v; SLNA 1/4613, CR 1791, ff. 169r, 170r-v; SLNA 1/4702, f. 11v.
33. Jones, "Fugitive Women," 223.
34. Robert Ross, "The Occupations of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Cape Town," *Studies in the History of Cape Town* 2 (1980): 10.
35. National Archives, The Hague, *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC), Archive number 1.04.02, Inventory number 638, Articles 52-56, 59, ff. 742-743.
36. Nigel Worden, "Public Brawling, Masculinity and Honour," in *Cape Town between East and West: Social Identities in a Dutch Colonial Town*, edited by Nigel Worden, 207. Johannesburg, Hilversum: Jacana, Verloren, 2013.
37. Elizabeth Elbourne, "Introduction: Key Themes and Perspectives," in *Sex, Power, and Slavery*, edited by Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne, 8. Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 2014.
38. *Ibid.*, 1.
39. NL-HaNA, VOC, 1.04.02, inv. no. 3323, ff. 938v-939r (January 1771).
40. SLNA 1/4662 ff. 2r, 8r.
41. The difficulty of interpreting toponyms is also dealt with in Herman Tiekens's contribution to this volume, as well as in Marina Carter's. See also Linda Mbeki and Matthias van Rossum, "Private Slave Trade in the Dutch Indian Ocean World: A Study into the Networks and Backgrounds of the Slavers and Enslaved in South Asia and South Africa," *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 1 (2017): 107-108.
42. SLNA 1/4662 ff. 2v, 8r.
43. SLNA 1/4662 f. 8r. His function was as kannekapul.
44. Slave testimony was not always accepted in court, but in this particular case it was testimony against a fellow slave that corroborated a European man's testimony, which is probably why it was accepted. That Christoffel was Catholic probably convinced the authorities that he understood the gravity and significance of the oath.
45. A Johannes Wijnbergen from Hoorn sailed to Asia in 1761 as a sailor, and left Company service in 1794. He sailed on board the *Lycchton*, a ship built in Enkhuizen. The ship completed a number of return journeys for the Enkhuizen

- and Hoorn chambers of the VOC. Wijnbergen was on board when the ship left Texel in December 1761 and, after stopping at the Cape, arrived in Batavia in July 1762. NL-HaNA, VOC, 1.04.02, inv. no. 14472, f. 156; “De VOC site”, accessed 4 April 2018, <https://www.vocsite.nl/schepen/detail.html?id=10636>.
46. SLNA 1/4662 f. 8r.
 47. SLNA 1/4662 f. 4r.
 48. This is true of a murder case in which the authorities were less interested in the murder than the talisman carried by the enslaved woman who murdered her son. The case is discussed in Alicia Schrikker and Kate Ekama, “Through the Lens of Slavery: Dutch Sri Lanka in the Eighteenth Century,” in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*, edited by Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern, 183–184. London: UCL Press, 2017.
 49. See Worden and Groenewald (eds.), *Trials of Slavery*, 83–95 (Anthonij van Goa); 115–119 (Jephta van Batavia); 323–30 (Januarij van Boegies); 520–525 (Ceres van Madagascar and April van Ceijlon). Two noteworthy differences between the Colombo materiaalhuis case and the Cape cases are that the violence in the Cape cases of suspected infidelity and/or jealousy was directed by men at their wives; and that the enslaved people involved were privately-owned and not Company slaves.
 50. Nigel Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, 57. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985; Robert Shell, *From Diaspora to Diorama: The Old Slave Lodge in Cape Town*, 250. Cape Town: NagsPro Multimedia, 2013.
 51. SLNA 1/4146, 19 November 1794 [Johan Gerard van Angelbeek; Alida, Bintang, Kassim and Patra]; SLNA 1/4146, 17 September 1795 [Johan Gerard van Angelbeek; Spadilje].
 52. SLNA 1/2665, 14 December 1784 [Jan Hendrik Borwater and Barbara Bregantina Lebeck], f. 8v; SLNA 1/2665, 8 July 1782 [Daniel Ternooij], f. 15v.
 53. SLNA 1/2663, 1762 [Godfried Leonhard de Coste], ff. 41r–42r.
 54. SLNA 1/2663, 1776 [Johanna Petronella Schade], ff. 56r–57r.
 55. Kate Ekama, “Precarious Freedom: Manumission in Eighteenth-Century Colombo,” *Journal of Social History* (forthcoming). Some of the individuals mentioned in this chapter are also discussed in the article where I show that manumitted status was precarious in eighteenth-century Colombo. For some manumitted slaves the change in legal status might have brought little change in material circumstances. Deeds and civil suits show that manumission could be revoked and debt could lead to re-enslavement.
 56. Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, I: 278–79 [195]; I: 389–93 [257]; II: 673–74 [457]; II: 769–72 [530].

57. At the Cape, VOC authorities instituted a system of apprenticeship (*inboekstelsel*) in 1775 whereby children born of enslaved fathers and Khoi mothers were bound to farm labour until they were 25 years old. See Richard Elphick, "The Khoisan to C. 1770," and Hermann Giliomee, "The Eastern Frontier, 1770–1812," in *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1840*, edited by Richard Elphick and Hermann Giliomee, 29 and 318–319. Cape Town: Longman, 1989.
58. Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek*, I: 309–10 [206].
59. *Ibid.*, 394–95 [259].
60. As a point of comparison see Shell's analysis of the slave lodge at Cape Town. Contemporary travellers commented on enslaved women reportedly flaunting their European lovers in Shell, *From Diaspora to Diorama*, 257–59.
61. These ideas have been developed by Hamer for Batavia. See Deborah Hamer, "Marriage and the Construction of Colonial Order: Jurisdiction, Gender and Class in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Batavia," *Gender and History* 29, no. 3 (2017): 622–640. Elisabeth Heijmans extends the scope across the Dutch empire in an analysis of VOC and WIC ordinances in Elisabeth Heijmans, "Legislating Diversity in the Dutch Early Modern Empire: Regulations on Concubinage and Marriage as Consolidator of Authority" (paper presented at Deutscher Historikertag, Münster, Germany, 26–28 September 2018). See also Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Imperial Rule*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2002.
62. See Jones' research mentioned above on women in Batavia. Robert Shell discusses manumitting enslaved women at the Cape in order to marry them in *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838*, 384–385. Hanover VA: University Press of New England, 1994. Marina Carter's chapter in this volume deals with similar themes for the island of Mauritius.
63. SLNA 1/2663, *Miscellaneous Last Wills*, 12 April 1782 [Gerrardus Cornelis Kersse], f. 11r. From the naming pattern in the will it is possible that Kersse fathered another daughter with a free woman to whom he bequeathed 50 Rds.
64. SLNA 1/4145, *Protocols of Deeds of Emancipation of Slaves*, 6 August 1738 [Frans Gomes; Rosetta, Louisa, Agida, and Elisabeth], ff. 5r–v.
65. SLNA 1/4613. The criminal roll of 1791 includes records for January 1792. In his analysis of VOC criminal records from the Cape, Nigel Penn has found that no European man was convicted of raping a Khoikhoi woman or enslaved women, yet rape did occur: Nigel Penn, "Casper, Crebis and the Knegt: Rape, Homicide and Violence in the Eighteenth-Century Rural Western Cape," *South*

- African Historical Journal* 66, no. 4 (2014): 611-634. For the later period, Pamela Scully has shown the ways in which rape cases were dealt with in the Cape Colony following emancipation (1834/1838), arguing that they were crucial to ways in which the colonial state was structuring ideas of gender, race and identities: Pamela Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823-1853*, 153-175. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann, 1997.
66. The blurred boundaries between assumed prostitution and alleged rape are explored in Ghosh's article through a number of illuminating court cases from Calcutta. The victims were free Indian girls and women: Durba Ghosh. "Household Crimes and Domestic Order: Keeping the Peace in Colonial Calcutta, c.1770-1840," *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 3 (2004): 599-623.
 67. The de Meuron regiment had first been stationed at the Cape where the soldiers—comprising Protestant recruits from Switzerland and numerous French convicts from Parisian jails to make up the numbers—were reportedly involved in duels, petty crimes and desertion. The regiment was transferred to Ceylon in the 1780s. See Charles-Daniel de Meuron, "Global Plants," accessed 17 April 2018, <https://plants.jstor.org/stable/10.5555/al.ap.person.bm000125731>. On the role of the regiment and de Meuron himself in the transition from Dutch to British rule see Schrikker, *Dutch and British Colonial Intervention*, 131-141.
 68. The criminal roll for 1792 has been lost.
 69. Nigel Worden states this clearly for VOC Cape Town: Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, 57.
 70. Ghosh uses this phrase to denote a range of domestic or household crimes which included rape, infanticide and domestic abuse and applies it in her analysis of court cases in colonial Calcutta: Ghosh, "Household Crimes," 599.
 71. Schrikker and Ekama, "Through the Lens of Slavery".
 72. *Ibid.*, 183-84.
 73. *Ibid.*, 185-88.
 74. Ward, *Networks of Empire*.
 75. Jayawardena, *Erasure of the Euro-Asians*, 19-36.

