

Unarchiving Colonial Narratives

*How can visual media be used as a
field of knowledge to address colonial legacies
and propose alternate histories?*

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Interlude 1

A spice of stories
A spice of histories
A spice of paradoxes

Deliciously toxic
And loaded with colonial nostalgia

Moisture hangs in the air
They go in search of the inner bark
A bundle of branches
Delicate sticks
One by one
They expose a soft inner bark
Sitting for hours at a stretch
Brass rods smoothen the surface
Loose cinnamon
Hard wood
Tired hands
Carving and slicing
With surgical precision
Thin strips, Quills
Curling up as they dry
Compensated for their weight

Alba, C₄, M₄, H₂
Small diameter, high grade
Brown gold
A sack once worth a fortune

Merchants peddled legends
Of a sweet-smelling spice
Mythical birds and ancient tales
Bloody battles and warfare
Closely guarding
A status symbol for the rich
A gift befitting kings
Brown gold
Comfort food

A long journey from a
Tropical spice isle
To spice aisles
Sweet and mild
A golden powder falling
Like soft snowflakes
Into my warm spiced apple pie



6 INTRODUCTION

I was born and raised in Colombo, Sri Lanka. My hometown lies on the western coast of the island and served as an important and strategic base for Dutch imperialists. From here they waged wars, built forts, shipped slaves, constructed canals and replaced wild forests with cinnamon plantations.

Growing up I was never taught to question this chapter of history. School curriculum's highlighted ethno-nationalist histories that focused on Sri Lanka's ancient and medieval kingdoms. The four hundred and fifty years of colonial rule under the Portuguese, Dutch and British was barely addressed and the general narrative was that the Dutch gave us fortified forts and a unique cultural heritage while the British gave us railways and tea plantations. There was little to no critical examination of this period and its consequences today.¹

In 2022 I moved to The Hague, Netherlands to pursue a master's in photography. It was my first time in the Netherlands and in the first few months I had already begun to encounter the lack of familiarity of Dutch people regarding the past colonial connection with Sri Lanka. This significant period is largely absent from mainstream narratives on the colonial empire in the Netherlands, while in Sri Lanka there is a different relationship with Dutch-colonial history defined by a type of colonial nostalgia.

Nira Wickramasinghe, Professor of Modern South Asian Studies at Leiden University remarks that in the last decades, Sri Lanka has produced its past through processes of 'heritagising', which she elaborates by saying, "*Urban planners and independent designers began what can almost be described as a love affair with very specific aspects of the Dutch heritage*".²

Wickramasinghe refers to this as a 'canny reversal of situations' where "*the colonial became the object of gaze and exploitation by market forces. While Portuguese and British colonialism are fading away, the Dutch past pops up revived, in multiple incarnations from Jaffna to Galle*".³

Ceylon tea from Sri Lanka is famous around the world, yet little is known about Ceylon cinnamon, a spice that captured the world's imagination for centuries. Cinnamon is a spice of stories that tell us

1 I am told that local and international school curriculum's in Sri Lanka have not changed much since then.

2 From Nira Wickramasinghe's foreword in the book, 'Cinnamon and Elephants. Sri Lanka and the Netherlands from 1600' by Lodewijk Wagenaar published in 2016 by the Rijksmuseum.

3 Ibid.

about competing empires, bloody battles, forced labour, land appropriation, food culture, and resilience.

I use the historical importance of cinnamon as a point of departure for my photographic practice. It is important to note that the seventeenth and eighteenth century visual documentation that I bring together with documentary photographs I have made are pre-photographic. By bringing these visuals from different eras together, a strategy emerges to unarchive historical material through the medium of photography. This generates a critical dialogue that unpacks some of the forgotten stories and violent histories from this period in order to reclaim meaning and offer new ways of engaging with this history.

My response to the historical materials serves as a commentary on visual culture, specifically during the Dutch colonial rule of Sri Lanka. The visual interventions in my research and practice offer new meaning and propose alternative narratives on how visual media can be used as a field of knowledge to address colonial legacies and the wider context of historical, social, and cultural relationships between the Netherlands and Sri Lanka.

My personal experiences act as essential triggers for most of my practice. I use auto-ethnography as the main research method to embody the topic which Carolyn Ellis defines as: "Research, writing, story, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political".⁴ I address absences or gaps within this colonial history by juxtaposing material from the archives with personal experiences to generate a shared ground for the reflections and analysis that will follow.

In both the writing and practice I delve into questions that must be addressed today to ensure that we acknowledge and confront our history in a way that our future no longer looks like that of our colonial past. The backbone of my thesis is my experience in the search to make visible the invisible: namely how we engage or disengage with our colonial past. My experiences are articulated in short stories or interludes that act like diary entries to reflect on some of the experiments and processes in my photographic practice.

The importance of the seventeenth century 'golden age' of Dutch colonial conquests is painfully visible today in museum collections such as the Rijksmuseum and the archives such as the National Archives in the Hague, Netherlands.

⁴ Ellis, Carolyn. *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Rowman Altamira, 2004.

My research delves into an underrepresented body of history that has had great societal and cultural implications and been instrumental in how the Netherlands built great colonial wealth.

In a time when the restitution of stolen artefacts from Sri Lanka, such as the Kandy cannon is being recognised⁵, my research represents a contribution to the conversation in how Dutch society is reckoning with its colonial past and addressing historical injustices. It is also part of a broader conversation between contemporary Dutch society and its migrant community.

In the following chapters I trace findings, encounters, and experiences of my journey moving between the Netherlands and Sri Lanka. The chapters are structured in a linear and conceptual format to take the reader along the path of my own reflections and realisations gained during the research process. I start with a historical overview of the importance of the cinnamon tree in the Dutch-Sri Lankan colonial context touching on the political, economic, and cultural impacts over the centuries, as well as how the spice is used today in food cultures.

The first chapter is written in two acts where I explore the differences in how history is engaged with and remembered in the Netherlands and Sri Lanka using personal experiences to structure observations and discrepancies. The first part of the chapter reveals blind spots and visible absences that I encountered whilst living in the Hague and the second act focuses on aspects of the colonial nostalgia I experienced growing up in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

The second chapter is also divided into two acts where I focus on findings from the archives in the Hague and Colombo with references to limitations of the archive and what they reveal. In the first act I include parts of a conversation with Dutch historian and author, Dr. Lodewijk Wagenaar, about the inaccessibility of the VOC archives for non-Dutch speakers. In the second act, I elaborate on personal reflections after visiting the National Archives in Colombo.

The third chapter delves into the notion of 'unarchiving'⁶: my process

5 Rijksmuseum to return colonial objects from its collection for the first time. Press release, Rijksmuseum, 2023, Accessed 20th February 2024, <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/press/press-releases/rijksmuseum-to-return-colonial-objects-from-its-collection-for-the-first-time>.

6 While looking for examples of artists that activate archival material in their work, I came across the 'Learning Unit', an educational tool developed by artists based in the UK who are concerned with decolonising art educations, unlearning histories that replicate the colonial gaze, and re-formatting art educations by centering artists and cultural producers of colour. The artists speak about the concept of 'unarchiving' in historical archives relating to black British artists. They define the term as: "removing materials from the archive and having a conversation, relationship and interaction with the archive. Demonstrating and expressing how we are impacted by the archive. Exploring how the archive relates to past, present and futures". Borrowing and extending this notion to my own practice, I expand further in Chapter 3 about my process of unarchiving by working with 17th century pre-photographic archival documentation and documentary images as a response that unarchives historical material through the medium of photography.

of working with seventeenth and eighteenth century pre-photographic archival documentation and documentary images, as a response that unarchives historical material through the medium of photography in order to have a critical dialogue. The chapter elaborates on how I approach the historical and visual material in my practice and the experiments with archival activations and methods of inquiry used for the visual outcomes of the research.

9

The fourth and final chapter uses a field trip to the cinnamon islands in the south of Sri Lanka as a case study to articulate some of the expectations, biases, and frustrations I endured while conducting this ongoing research. It also touches on my interest in exploring the role of oral history in knowledge production and how I plan to use oral methods of storytelling in an audio-visual essay that I am developing.



Figure 1: The Cinnamologus bird, shown in a medieval bestiary belonging to the Museum Meermanno.

Cinnamon has been used by humans for centuries; as food, for healing and medicinal purposes, in burials, oils⁷, as incense, and much more. Ancient Egyptians were believed to have used the spice in their mummification processes and Greeks in the manufacture of perfumes and oils. The Chinese were believed to have used it for preserving the body of the dead.⁸

It was Arab traders that first introduced Cinnamon to the west and managed to dominate the trade for centuries through their vast network of trading routes that stretched from Rome to China. These traders and merchants spread elaborate tales of the source of cinnamon in an attempt to keep it a closely guarded secret for many years.

One of the most famous ancient tales speaks of the 'Cinnamologus' bird, a mythical creature that lived deep inside forests. These birds preferred to make nests in cinnamon trees, where they strip off the

7 Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 5, London, Encyclopaedia Britannica Ltd., 1960, p.713.

8 Cheng Te-K'un, Archaeology in China, Vol. II, Cambridge, W. Heffer & Sons Ltd., 1960, p. 66.

bark in order to make nests. The nests were built high up in the trees and were difficult to reach, so those in search of the spice had to find creative ways of reaching the cinnamon. One way was to lure the Cinnamologus with large chunks of meat. The birds would fly down from their nests, snatch up the meat, and fly back. The precarious cinnamon nests would then collapse when the bird returned from the weight of the bait. Then quick-witted traders would gather up the fallen cinnamon and take it to the market where it was traded and shipped to distant lands.

Cinnamon from the nests of these birds was believed to be the most valuable of all.

In Greek and Roman legend, cinnamon was also associated with the Phoenix, a mythical bird who built its nests using cinnamon before it would burn to ashes. Even today the Phoenix and its cinnamon nest remains a symbol of rebirth and resurrection.

The first mention that cinnamon grew in Sri Lanka was in Arab writer Zakariya al-Qazwini's 'Monument of Places and History of God's Bondsmen' from 1270.⁹ Ibn Battuta, a fourteenth century traveller who visited Sri Lanka, left an account of cinnamon writing, "The whole of its coasts are covered with cinnamon trees brought down by torrents and heaped up like hills on the shore".¹⁰

For hundreds of years, people searched far and wide for the source of this fragrant spice that captivated people's imagination and spirit. Until the early 16th century, it was Arab merchants that largely traded cinnamon, keeping its source a secret in order to ward off competitors. When Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese sailor, found a sea route directly from Europe to India in 1498, it opened up possibilities to trade with other countries in the region. Soon, the cinnamon trade was taken over by the Portuguese, and later Dutch imperialists following the rivalries and expansion of their colonial empires.

In 1672 the Dutch minister of the Reformed Church, Philippe Baldaeus wrote, "the Helen of this isle is the finest and purest cinnamon",¹¹ as it was the spice that drew the attention of western colonial powers to the island, becoming the primary article of trade for the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC). They embarked on long and arduous sea-bound journeys in a spice race that would eventually become the epicentre of a European

9 Dewasiri, Nirmal Ranjith & Wagenaar, Lodewijk & Uyangoda, Jayadeva. (2020). Historical, Ethno-Botanical and Social Aspects of Cinnamon Cultivation in Sri Lanka. 10.1007/978-3-030-54426-3_2.

10 From page 254 of 'Ibn Battuta Travels in Asia and Africa 1325-1354' translated and selected by H.A.R Gibb, lecturer in Arabic, School of Oriental Studies, University of London 1929.

11 Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon, Volume 50, no 3 and 4, July - October 1960, page 66. Accessed 15th April 2024 [https://thedutchburgherunion.org/journals/vol_41_50/JDBU%20Vol%2050%20No%203-4%20-%201960\(1\).pdf](https://thedutchburgherunion.org/journals/vol_41_50/JDBU%20Vol%2050%20No%203-4%20-%201960(1).pdf).

battle for dominion of one of the costliest spices in the world, giving rise to the first international trade routes, capitalist-based economies and the first mega-corporation: the VOC.



Figure 2: Production of cinnamon illustrated in the book 'Ceylonese Sketches' by J.L.K. van Dort made in 1883.

“Cinnamon was so integral to the Dutch empire that when they created a coat of arms for the island, they based it on what they believed the island was best known for – cinnamon, elephants, coconut trees, and mountains. Three bales of cinnamon can be seen in the foreground in front of the elephant, with another bale positioned behind. The elephant is seen to hold a branch of cinnamon in its trunk”.¹²



*Figure 3 :
The Dutch VOC
coat of arms for
Ceylon drawn by
an unknown artist
for the report on
the circuit tour
of Governor I.A.
Rumph (1717).*

¹² de Silva, R.K & Beumer, W.G.M. Illustrations and Views of Dutch Ceylon, 1602-1796: A Comprehensive Work of Pictorial Reference with Selected Eye-witness Accounts, Serendib Publications. 1988. p 405.

14 Those who controlled spices, controlled the world. It was the Portuguese that first occupied and colonised the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) between 1597 and 1658. While they were interested in trade, they were more interested in spreading the Christian faith and were the first to introduce Christianity to the island, even offering special favours to those that converted.¹³

When the VOC arrived on the shores of Sri Lanka in the early seventeenth century, they had one motive: to secure a monopoly on the trade of Ceylon cinnamon harvested from the bark of an indigenous plant in Sri Lanka. Cinnamon, along with other international and colonial trading goods, was instrumental in positioning the political and economic strength of the Netherlands against competing European powers such as the Portuguese and British.

The association between cinnamon and a distant island helped to make the spice seem mysterious and exotic. These types of impressions were reinforced by books published during this period such as those by English botanist John Hill's and French horticulturist de Cossigny's, which details the process of production of cinnamon including hand sketched illustrations depicting 'exotic' spices and native people.

It is important to note that hunger for cinnamon went well beyond their aromatic flavour in food preparation. Although cinnamon was consumed in Asia for thousands of years, in Europe it became a symbol of social status – cinnamon, like most spices became a way to define what it meant to be wealthy and powerful, as the plant was commodified and sold for its exotic and rare characteristics.

As demand inevitably grew, methods of harvesting the spice were also impacted. In the late eighteenth century, the Dutch introduced changes to indigenous methods of growing and harvesting cinnamon in Sri Lanka that would permanently transform the way the spice was produced.

¹³ de Silva, C.R. *Beyond the Cape: The Portuguese encounter with the peoples of South Asia*, in S.B Shwartz (ed), *Implicit Understandings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p 257.

Before the Dutch arrived, Cinnamon trees grew wild amongst other tropical trees and plants in the southwestern region of Sri Lanka.

To supply the massive European demand for cinnamon, the Dutch needed to mobilise various forms of labour. They did this by exploiting an existing community of cinnamon peelers known as the 'Salagama' caste. The social class and caste system during this period meant that people's caste defined their livelihood.

The Salagama caste had been peeling cinnamon for the local kings, but following Dutch rule they began collecting, peeling, and transporting cinnamon for the VOC. Many of them were subjected to harsh working conditions, exploitation, and punishments if they did not yield results. New laws were introduced preventing people from cutting down cinnamon trees in where the 'chena' cultivation method was practiced, permits were required to grow, and fines and punishments enforced if people broke the rules.

After more than a century of occupation, from 1771 onwards, the VOC began cultivating cinnamon in controlled settings. This gave rise to the concept of cinnamon gardens (kaneeltuinen), which amounted to nothing less than a successful colonial plantation system established from the Western coast in Negombo all the way down to Kalutara in the Southern coast.

These monocultures helped to quench the VOC's insatiable appetite for cinnamon as it allowed the spice to be grown on an immense scale with less reliance on the cinnamon peelers. Regulations were issued from time to time against private dealing in cinnamon, which was even punishable by death. Destruction of plants also carried the death penalty and whipping in certain parts.

Peelers would often flee to the central part of the island and take refuge in the Kandyan Kingdom (territories that the Dutch were unable to capture) in order to escape this turmoil. Although a rebellion against the Dutch between 1760-66 finally led to change in their status and treatment in society.¹⁴

Following the production and flow of cinnamon was the need to develop extensive infrastructure on land and by the coast. Canals, forts, warehouses and ports were engineered primarily along the coast of Sri Lanka to transport, store and ship these goods, shaping the landscape once more.

¹⁴ Dewasiri, Nirmal Ranjith. *The Adaptable Peasant*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 31 Dec. 2007) doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004165083.i-294>.

16 In their conquest of the island, the Dutch permanently transformed the economic, ecological and cultural landscape by intervening in how cinnamon was grown, harvested, produced, traded, priced, and consumed.

Cinnamon's long and turbulent history means that it was coveted, exoticised and fetishised. As wars over monopoly for the spice were fought, the perceived luxury of spice gave the goods disproportional importance within the marketplace. And therefore, it was possible for non-native and 'exotic' foods to define trade routes and make unexpected connections across distant lands.

The next section explores the contemporary role of cinnamon in food culture in both Sri Lanka and Europe and addresses how the dark history of cinnamon is largely forgotten today.



Figure 4: Cinnamon tea is consumed in Sri Lanka by boiling whole sticks in water. The tea is said to have many health benefits including lowering cholesterol levels.

How does the bark of a tree growing in forests of a distant land find its way to your kitchen cabinet?

South Asians have been cooking with cinnamon for centuries. It is a staple spice of the Dutch-Burgher community, an ethnic group in Sri Lanka descending from the early Dutch settlers. It is also used by the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities of Sri Lanka in food preparation of dishes such as ambul thiyal curry and biriyani.

Apart from its role in food flavouring, cinnamon has a long history of use in traditional medicine and has been used to treat digestive issues and cholesterol, among other things. By the mid-nineteenth century, cinnamon transformed from a luxury product to a common spice found in recipes across Europe and the rest of the world. Today Cinnamon is found everywhere from supermarket aisles to fine-dining restaurants. ‘Kaneel’, ‘canela’, ‘zimt’ or cinnamon tells a story of cold winter days with mulled wine, spiced apple cake, speculaas cookies, and pumpkin pies. Paired with traditions and flavours that seem to become synonymous with the holiday festivities.

Why is this tropical spice so representative of this season and not another?

Do Europeans eat significantly more of it in winter than in spring or summer?

Winter encompasses a plethora of spices like cloves, nutmeg, and cinnamon. Lots of cinnamon. If there was one spice to represent Christmas and the holidays, it would be this one. Speculaas, zimtsterne, susumelle, sirupsnipper, gingerbread: all across Europe, Christmas has a distinct taste, and smell.

Upon entering Western recipes and cookbooks, cinnamon appears to have been wiped clean of its brutal colonial past. Despite the popularity of cinnamon, most people remain unaware of the fraught colonial history of this once highly sought-after spice.

Today Ceylon cinnamon is marketed as ‘true’ cinnamon in order to distinguish it from the cheaper variety of Cassia grown in other parts of Asia.

In the introduction I traced the social, political and cultural context of cinnamon over the last few centuries highlighting the role of Dutch colonial interventions in this historical period.

The primary reason for Dutch occupation in Sri Lanka was to establish a monopoly on the trade of cinnamon, and as a result cinnamon

plantations were introduced, and local cinnamon peelers exploited. The processes involved in the production and consumption of the spice were permanently impacted due to these events.

In the following chapters, I expand on my personal journey of encounters and reflections during my research. My observations and findings are rooted in a personal context and offer insights to the ways in which I respond to this through my photographic practice.



Many of us have personal stories that connect us to childhood kitchens, holidays or cozy gatherings. I remember how the smell of cinnamon would waft into my room enveloping me in a warm blanket of sweet and spice. It was the special treat that I would come home to, the spice that made almost any food taste like comfort food.



Figure 5: Sago, which comes from the Sago palm, is similar to Tapioca pearls. The sago is first cooked in coconut milk. Treacle and cinnamon are added once the sago is cooked, and it is topped with raisins and toasted cashew nuts. The sweet pudding has a jiggly consistency and is eaten typically warm as a snack or dessert.

My mother's sago pudding infused with cinnamon was something I craved often. After leaving my home, I found myself being more nostalgic about the dish, perhaps because it was something I felt I could no longer have. When I visited Sri Lanka in early 2024, I documented the process of my mother making sago pudding as part of my research. Considering the limited ways in which cinnamon is used in Western recipes, I wanted to archive the different ways the spice is used, starting with my own family.

Growing up around a taste and smell that offered so much comfort, and seemed so commonplace, I had never considered the complex and contested history of cinnamon and its global consequences

Date	No
<u>Sri Lankan Sago Pudding</u>	
<u>Ingredients:</u>	
1 cup Sago	
3 cups water	
3 cups thick coconut milk	
1 cup grated Jaggery	
1 tsp powdered cinnamon & nutmeg	
Pinch of salt	
Cashew nuts	
Handful of Raisins	
<u>Instructions:</u>	
1) Bring the water to boil & add the Sago. Boil for 5 minutes while stirring constantly. Making sure no clots form. Add the salt.	
2) Lower the flame and cover the lid & simmer until the sago pearls turn translucent.	
3) Mix in the coconut milk, Jaggery, and cinnamon powder & nutmeg. Keep stirring and boil for about 3 minutes.	
4) Take off the heat add the cashews and the raisins.	
Serve this hot or cold.	
DroMata	

Figure 6: My mother's recipe for sago pudding with cinnamon.

Blind Spots, gaps and a visible absence.



Figure 7: Still from a video at the 'Our Colonial Inheritance' exhibition at the Wereldmuseum in Amsterdam.

'Inspire world citizenship' is written in cursive lettering on the white-washed walls among a sea of other words. The museum writes boldly and urgently. They want to make the world a 'better place'. *"To connect, be honest and innovative and increase knowledge of how people shape the world together"*. Grandiose statements that require grandiose actions.

A Bob Marley quote is referenced in red above one of the walls. 'Emancipate yourself from mental slavery', it reads. The entrance to the exhibition addressing colonial injustices in Amsterdam features two large LCD screens. A video plays on loop - people carry flags as they walk barefoot along the dunes of the Dutch coast. Vibrant flags of former colonies are paraded against the stark background of the yellow sand and blue ocean.

24 But there was a flag missing.

My eyes dart across the sections of the elaborate museum installation, squinting at each of the descriptions, trying to find some mention of my home. Ghana, India, Suriname, Indonesia, . . . Sri Lanka.

There it was at last.

A footnote. One side of a glass panel dedicated to remembering over one hundred and fifty years of exploitation and settlement, using safe language to talk about colonial atrocities.

The exhibition is an ambitious attempt to acknowledge, inform, and educate the public about Dutch colonial history and its repercussions today. Visitors are supposed to be confronting colonial legacies, but it didn't feel like they were. All I could see was the encasing of objects of rich cultural and historical significance.

Glass cabinets with shiny spotlights illuminating their 'subjects'. Prized possessions. Trophies. Stolen artefacts.

Many belonging to other nations, exploited to build the riches of this one. In many ways reinforcing the colonial roots within which many of these objects were acquired in the first place. That's not to deny that these efforts could be productive. These are very necessary steps in the right direction. However, there were still many unanswered questions.

Who is included in dialogues on decolonisation?

Which communities and 'experts' are consulted in the process?

Is an event like this an attempt to reconcile with the past or simply an act of tokenism?

I feel small and insignificant among the tall columns and extravagant decor of the colonial-era building. As a non-Dutch visitor, I can't help but reflect on just how entrenched these cultural institutions are in the very colonial systems they're trying to shed light on.

Something that strikes me is the unbearable silence of these spaces. What grand narrative did these collections and installations bring forward?

What does honouring true provenance look like?

Is it returning objects? Is it issuing an apology?

Curating an exhibition?

How can we, as visitors, reflect better on these gestures and what they reveal?

I was surprised by the noticeable absence of Dutch–Sri Lankan history within the exhibition. In the following months, I would come to find that this historical period was not addressed in mainstream dialogues about colonial history within the Netherlands at large.

These experiences formed the basis of my interest in understanding how colonial histories are told and maintained. They triggered questions about how to make space for alternative narratives and methods of storytelling – ones that are inclusive and representational and that go beyond traditional forms of display in order to interrogate histories.

In the next chapter I contrast these reflections to my experiences of this history and how it featured within the cultural landscape of my hometown in Colombo, Sri Lanka.



Figure 9: Images from my personal archive taken at Dutch forts in Galle and Jaffna.

CHAPTER I, Act 2

Authentic Dutch World Charm.

My hometown was an important and strategic base for Dutch imperialists. They built forts, extracted forced labour, shipped slaves, constructed canals and replaced wild ecosystems with plantations. Growing up in Colombo, Sri Lanka I encountered a very different way of engaging with this history.

I remember Sunday lunches at home where we would often savour 'lamprais', a large serving of rice with assorted meats and vegetables all wrapped in a fragrant banana leaf. The name is thought to be a derivative of the Dutch word 'lomprijst', which roughly translates to a packet of rice.¹⁵

Lamprais is a delicious encounter of Sri Lankan and Dutch cultures with a history dating back to the seventeenth century when Dutch Burghers: an ethnic group of people with Dutch and Sri Lankan descent¹⁶ – began adapting a Javanese meal called 'lemper' (rice and meat wrapped in a banana leaf) to local tastes. Even today, 'lamprais' is the pride of the Sri Lankan Dutch Burgher community and a signature dish served at the VOC cafe of the Dutch Burgher Union in Colombo.



*Figure 10:
Lamprais from
the Dutch
Burgher Union
in Colombo.*

15 Ben Groundwater, What is lamprais? Sri Lanka created one of the world's greatest box lunches, The Sydney Morning Herald, Accessed 10th March 2024,

<https://www.smh.com.au/traveller/inspiration/what-is-lamprais-sri-lanka-created-one-of-the-worlds-greatest-box-lunches-20230110-h292n0.html>.

16 The Dutch Burghers, most of whom are descendants of Dutch VOC in Sri Lanka are an example of living heritage on the island. The Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon founded in 1908 is an active organisation in Colombo with a vision to "promote the moral, intellectual, and social well-being of the Dutch descendants in Ceylon". The organisation is also well known for its 'VOC cafe', a popular restaurant serving Sri Lankan-Dutch Burgher foods.

Every December I would look forward to eating Breudher, a traditional Sri Lankan-Dutch Burgher cake baked in a circular mould with raisins and spices, which comes from the Dutch cake 'Broeder', or 'Poffert' (Groningen) or 'Boffert' (Friesland), or 'Ketelkoek'. Different recipes, but they come down to roughly the same thing: a fairly thick batter, such as cake batter or pancake batter, cooked in a mould Breudher is typically eaten with butter, jam and a slice of cheese and is part of my family's Christmas traditions; one that has nostalgic childhood memories.

I remember taking a Navy operated boat to visit the island Fort Hammenheil, a VOC stronghold turned tourist resort. This Portuguese-built fort located on a small island in Northern Sri Lanka was captured by the Dutch who subsequently renamed it 'Hammenhiel' (Heel of the Ham), as they considered that the shape of Sri Lanka resembled a smoked ham, with the fort being located at the point where the shank bone projects.

I remember the intense heat of the Jaffna peninsula in Northern Sri Lanka. Taking a ferry to Delft Island to see its wild horses. Exploring the baobab trees and touring the ruins of a Dutch fort, church, hospital, and pigeon messenger house. Learning about a past that had always seemed so naturally entangled with my own.

The sunsets from the ramparts of Dutch fort in Galle were always special. I remember sitting on the edge watching the warm waters of the Indian ocean lap against the fortified coral walls. Walking the cobblestone streets of the narrow fort. Eating ice cream and soaking in the fancy colonial Dutch villas and restaurants steeped in luxury and chic interiors. There was a sense of nostalgia in the air. These were relics, museums, and monuments which beamed a proud history and a recognition of foreign heritage and culture inherited and amalgamated over the years.

UNESCO declared the Galle Fort as a World Heritage Site in 1988. Since then, the fortified town of Galle has become a major tourist attraction and the largest colonial monument on the island. Following the end of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict in 2009, the Dutch government has been funding the restoration of many Dutch forts and complexes across the island creating attractive tourist hot spots and heritage sites. The project description for the conservation of the Dutch ramparts states that, "The most important objective of the plan was to preserve the historic character of the Fort while enhancing its function as a living city".¹⁷

¹⁷ Conservation of the Ancient Rampart in the Galle Fort, International Heritage Cooperation, Accessed 8th March 2024,

<https://internationalheritage.dutchculture.nl/en/conservation-ancient-rampart-galle-fort>.

Urban anthropologist and researcher, Michiel Baas, explores the role of the Dutch in their preservation efforts and the impacts of tourism within these sites. Baas questions the need for restoration of Dutch forts in his writings, *“Forts are usually left to decay in the sun, weed taking over, cows and goats found to be grazing amid collapsed ram-parts and archways.... What could possibly have motivated the Dutch to pour money into restoration?”*¹⁸

Does it contribute towards a nuanced understanding of our shared and problematic history?

Does it contribute to contemporary narratives of decolonisation and rectifying past injustices?

It was only after moving to the Netherlands that I began to notice how different my relationship to Sri Lanka’s Dutch-colonial history was from those living in the Netherlands. Nira Wickramasinghe, Professor of Modern South Asian Studies at Leiden University writes:

*“Dutchness is a palimpsest, an allegory of a colonial past stripped of its often controversial and violent content. All that remains is a spectacle, an object for people with disposable income to consume voraciously.”*¹⁹

As a Sri Lankan who is based in the Netherlands, Wickramasinghe researches and writes about colonial history in South Asia. Her findings and analyses eloquently critique how the past is engaged with and remembered.

*“While postcolonial Sri Lanka moved from indifference to voracious consumption of its colonial past, Dutch society seems to remain rooted in denial. Words such as race or colonial violence are seldom heard in public discourse and the academy.”*²⁰

18 Baas, Michiel. Jaffna: Sri Lanka’s northernmost city may still remind you of civil war, but think Dutch forts and ‘prison tourism’ today. *The Economic Times*, 2023, accessed 8th April 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/opinion/et-commentary/jaffna-sri-lankas-northernmost-city-may-still-remind-you-of-civil-war-but-think-dutch-forts-and-prison-tourism-today/articleshow/100215949.cms?from=mdr>.

19 Foreword by Nira Wickramasinghe, *“Cinnamon And Elephants. Sri Lanka and The Netherlands from 1600”*.

20 Ibid.

As I walked along the cobblestone streets of the Galle fort in early 2024, I couldn't help but resonate with Wickramasinghe's words. A hotel inside the walled fort entices visitors with their 'authentic Dutch world charm', reinstating what appears to be an insatiable appetite for heritage and colonial nostalgia. A sweetened history consumed both by European tourists and Sri Lankan citizens; fuelled by Dutch interventions and a lack of critically engaging with a shared colonial history.



Figure 11: A hotel inside the Galle fort, Sri Lanka in 2024 (above)

Figure 12: Poster depicting the prison experience at Fort Hammenheil in Jaffna, Sri Lanka (top left)

Figure 13: Drawing depicting the Dutch capture of Fort Hammenheil from the Portuguese in 1658 (bottom left).



DUTCH HOUSES

They died and left behind these monuments.
 Plucked from the streets of Den Haag, Leyden, Delft;
 Governors, evangelists, and merchants.
 Those the cinnamon and brocaded years had blessed.
 Full of crinolines, carriages and brick ovens.
 And rough soldiery floating on pot-still arrack;
 Solid as wholemeal bread, these old houses.
 Once guarded the bored, the romantic, and bright.
 And now part of our heritage—the granite, and limestone.
 Or baked brick, remind the mere talkers.
 Of their enormous industry and work, well done.
 So honour these bright builders, whose blood.
 Still flows merry and quick, where least known.
 And where the sea-spray on the Sea pink's blown.

(With acknowledgment to the Times of Ceylon).

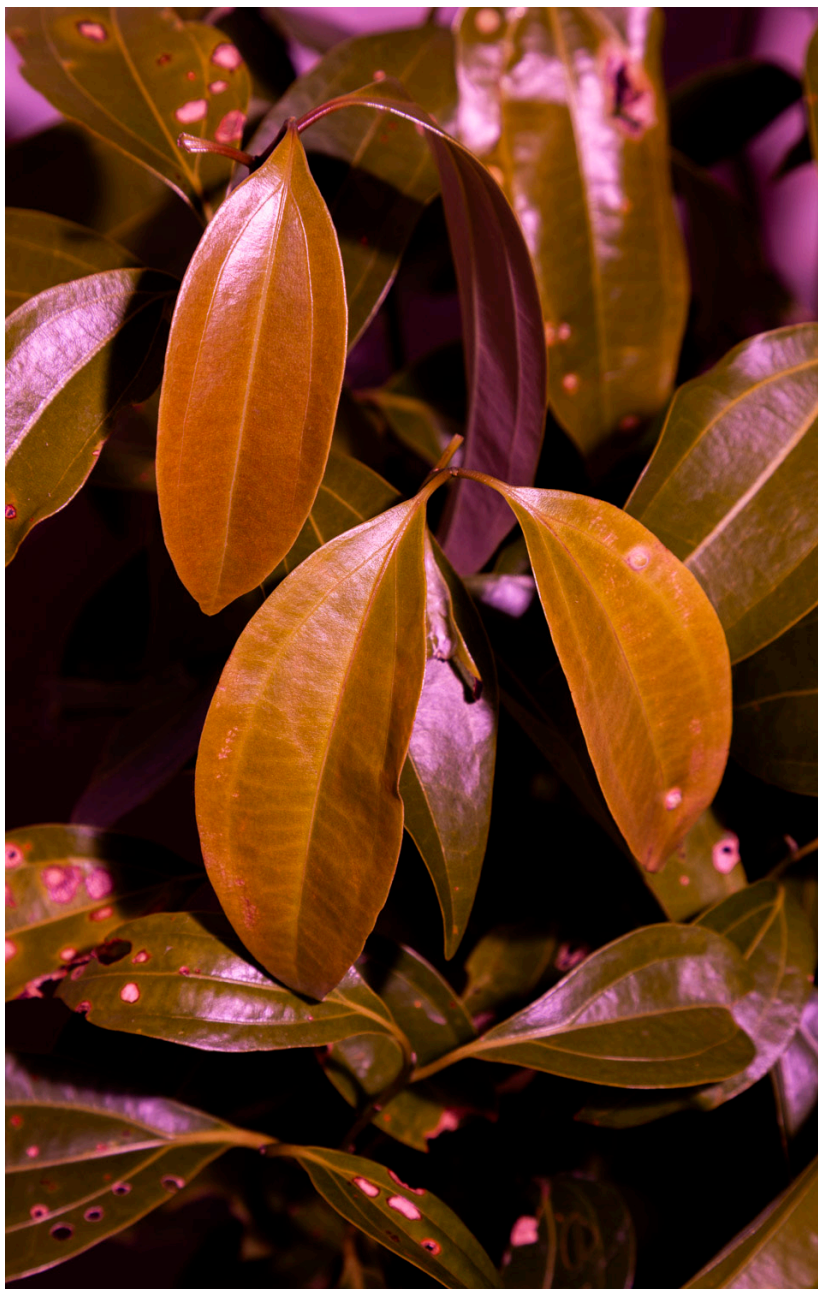
Figure 14: Extracted from page 133 of the Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon, Vol 41, No. 3, July 1951.



36 Interlude III

The western colonial gaze portrayed the cinnamon tree using botanical drawings throughout most of history. Drawings such as those by German chemist and physician, Hermann Adolph Köhler in his book 'Medizinal-Pflanzen' produced in 1887 offer a scientific look at the leaves, flower and bud of the cinnamon tree.

In my photographic practice I wanted to find a way of representing the physicality of the tree in an unconventional way. I created a studio setting with bright colours to photograph elements of the tree such as the bark and leaves. I wanted to play with the idea of cinnamon as the protagonist or silent hero in my story - one that has witnessed momentous changes over the years and still remains unchanged within the landscape today. Most people only relate to cinnamon as a powdered substance, through these images I hoped to offer another way of looking at the tree and finding ways to highlight its physical characteristics and giving presence to the material nature of a spice that is only associated with a packaged end product.





CHAPTER 2, Act 1

Archival red tape.

I find myself in a quiet, residential area close to Amsterdam Nieuw-West. After a small tour of the apartment, we end up in the study, a dimly lit room surrounded by shelves of books neatly stacked according to region and topic of interest. I am sitting adjacent to the shelf on various books from Ceylon and Sri Lanka. I am here to meet Dutch historian and author, Dr. Lodewijk Wagenaar. Wagenaar has spent the last few decades of his life researching and writing about Dutch-Sri Lankan relations and is the author of the book “Cinnamon & Elephants- Sri Lanka and the Netherlands from 1600”, which served as a foundation for my research.

Wagenaar peers through his oval glasses as he reaches for a thick book with a title written in Dutch. The word ‘VOC’ catches my eye. He begins to tell me how meticulous the Dutch were in record keeping and launches into a story about the historical archival processes of the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

Things took time back then. A letter written in Galle would first have to be sent to Colombo, the capital, where it would be copied, then sent to Batavia, the headquarters of VOC. Here it was copied once more, and finally sent to Amsterdam - a process taking anything between several months to years. Once in Amsterdam, the physical copies would remain, transforming into archives that would accumulate over the centuries.

Wagenaar hunches over his desk as he navigates two computer screens simultaneously to show me material from digitised archives in the Netherlands.

L.W: Today you can find everything online

We look at digitised indexes of papers from Ceylon sent and arriving in the year of 1783.

L.W: Book one, book two, and three. It starts with a copy of a letter from Governor Falk and the councils to the chamber in Amsterdam dated and signed 7th March 1782. So, there's an introductory letter. Dear Sir, blah, blah, blah, blah, uh, see attachment.

...So that's just one page. It's politeness.

...Then we have letters from the governor to the Cape, blah, blah, blah, blah. Well, that's not so interesting for you.

...But this could be interesting. Copy of letters from the Colombo dissave and the dissave from the three korales, the neighbours. The governor in Colombo and the King of Kandy talked to each other through the dissave of Colombo. So that is diplomatic letters: complaints, requests, sending back of slaves, or the peeling of cinnamon.

But what is written in these letters? You cannot see. We only have the index.

Um, here's two pages.

I read for you just to understand in what difficult situation you are, because it's in Dutch.

< Inaudible Dutch word >

L.W: There was an annual meeting between the heads of the cinnamon peelers and the cinnamon peelers in Colombo. And it always started the same way, hello, how you doing? When you left your villages, I hope there weren't too many diseases. And that the paddy was good quality.

Blah, blah, blah, blah. Polite conversation.

And then, uhm, you did not peel the same quantity this year as the year before?

So, that was business. But <inaudible Dutch words > means the meeting between the king and the peoples, which all also was the kind of confirmation of the contracts, blah, blah, blah

Nowadays, a lot of the documents have been translated, not too good, but well, that will improve, I guess, through artificial intelligence.²¹

And you also can look at it, but those translations are Dutch. So, there's a problem.

Theorist of photography and visual culture, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, has worked extensively on the problematics of archives as well as suggesting ways to navigate them. Azoulay speaks of the 'archival regime',²² which destroyed existing worlds to dislocate, tag and classify people within an imperial taxonomy and it is a reminder that the violent separation of people from their material worlds so that they could not create meaning on their own terms continues to this day.

²¹ This is already the case with websites like Globalise (<https://globalise.huygens.knaw.nl/>) that enhance the accessibility and research potential of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) archives for researchers and the general public.

²² Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. Verso, 2019.

Cameroonian historian and political theorist, Achille Mbembe, who has contributed greatly to the discourse on colonialism and its consequences writes, *“Archives are the product of a process which converts a certain number of documents into items judged to be worthy of preserving and keeping in a public place. Thereby making the reading and preserving of archives inherently subjective”*.

Mbembe goes on to expand that there are several factors involved in this subjective experience of the archives: *“who owns them; on whose authority they depend; the political context in which they are visited; the conditions under which they are accessed; the distance between what is sought and what is found; the manner in which they are decoded and how what is found there is presented and made public”*.²³

It was twilight when I left the apartment. As I walked back to catch my train, I couldn't help but reflect on the immense efforts the Dutch put into documenting, preserving and archiving information that served their agenda in their colonies and back at home. However, it was not just the inaccessibility that was problematic. There seemed to be a lack of other voices within these archival records. A systemic erasure.

A lack of representation.

Who owned these archives?

Who owns them today with digitisation?

Certain archives are now becoming increasingly open source. But the processes surrounding this will still take a lot more time before it can be universally accessible and relevant. And still, the colonial origins of words and archival processes can never fully escape these systems. The next part of my archival research took place thousands of kilometres away, in Colombo, where issues of accessibility would be of a different nature.

23 Mbembe, Achille. The Power of the Archive and its Limits. In: Hamilton, C., Harris, V., Taylor, J., Pickover, M., Reid, G., Saleh, R. (eds) *Refiguring the Archive*. Springer, Dordrecht, 2002. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0570-8_2.

Interlude IV:

What do the images that came out of the 150-year Dutch-Sri Lanka colonial period show us?

How much was erased and forgotten in the process of documenting?

Visual artist Rajkamal Kahlon's approach to unarchiving colonial documents resonated with me during my research. In works such as 'Double Take' and 'Do you know our names'; Kahlon reappropriates ethnographic images from the twentieth century in visually striking ways by overlaying colonial imagery with artistic interventions laden with irony and political connotations. Beauty is an integral part of her artistic method and a form of protest in empowering those who are featured her works. While Kahlon works primarily with mixed-media paintings, her process of illuminating violence and tensions through artistic intervention was helpful in my own practice as ways to approach historical material.

In colonial storytelling many of the pre-photographic paintings depict expansive landscapes devoid of people.

Some of my earlier attempts at archival activations seen in figure 15 isolated figures from digitised archives in the Netherlands and layered them onto depopulated landscapes from this period. The cut outs of people appear like ghosts that haunt the landscapes. The figures in black are labourers, soldiers, citizens, and slaves living in Sri Lanka in 1662 drawn by Dutch painter Esaias Boursse.²⁴ These figures were the backbone of society and crucial in building wealth for the Dutch colonial empire. Many of these individuals, including the cinnamon peelers were invisible in most visual documentations and valued only through the service they offered their colonial rulers.

Looking back at the archival activations I made, I feel there is a step further I could take in representing the invisible bodies featured here. I wanted to liberate them and make them visible. However, in removing detail of the drawings and only keeping only their silhouette, I do not feel as if they are fully seen in the way I had hoped to liberate them. There remains a layer that keeps them concealed. In Chapter 3, I return to my practice once again to expand further on other ways in which I am approaching archival visual documentation.

²⁴ I discuss Esaias Boursse's work in more detail in Chapter 3.



Figure 15: Images of archival interventions from the project 'Blind Spot'.

44 CHAPTER 2, ACT 2

Limits of the Archive.

A large white Buddha statue sits enclosed within a glass. It is placed at the base of a Ficus tree that towers above the statue, drooping its thread-like roots towards the ground. The Ficus, more commonly known as a 'Bo' tree in Sri Lanka is a holy tree, revered in Buddhist culture. It remains a powerful symbol in a largely Buddhist country, representing one's capacity to attain enlightenment and nirvana.

Behind the tree is a small door leading to a building that houses much of Sri Lanka's archives. Upon entering I am asked for my national identity card. The lady seated behind the desk hands over a pen and asks me to write my name and phone number on a single-rule notebook. I catch a glimpse of details of other visitors in this book, including their phone numbers. She holds onto my ID and offers a visitor pass in exchange for entrance to the building.

I navigate through a maze of doorways and corridors. With each turn I zig zag through an exhaustingly large public institution that leads to dead ends and guarded rooms. Framed photos of white European men adorn the walls. Colonial officials from the Portuguese, Dutch and British era watch over the visitors. They serve as a reminder to what we might encounter behind these closed doors and hint at the lack of critical discourse when it comes to acknowledging our colonial history.

I'm asked to proceed to another counter where I fill in a form stating my purpose of visit and what I intend to research while I'm here. After placing my signature on the document carefully, I receive a pale yellow piece of cardboard paper roughly the size of a business card. The paper grants access to the reading room of the archives for a period of six months.

I'm informed that the Times Collection is the only photographic archive that is digitised here. Printed by the Times of Sri Lanka press, the paper was one of the largest newspaper photographic collections in local publishing, offering a glimpse into the political social, economic and cultural context of Sri Lanka between 1946-1985. Out of the three computers in the reading room, only two are functional.

I log in, and excitedly type in the word 'cinnamon'. That's strange. Only five searches appear. I tried different words too, 'Kurunudu' the Sinhala word for cinnamon, and 'Kaneel'. However, I was left with very little visual material. Looking closer at the descriptions of the

online files, I noticed that there was no tagging or metadata. The images were not indexed according to themes or categories. The only information included was the title and year.

Inside the reading room a dusty cupboard reveals an index of archival resources in English that include textual records to peruse. Sifting through the cards, I soon realise that the only information given is the year of print and title of the news source. There's no indication about the contents of the archives or what one could expect to find within these sources. Picking one of these cards was a sort of gamble, where you wouldn't know what you would find, and you would have to rely on a sizable amount of patience and luck to find what you were looking for.

Indeed, I had not spent a considerable amount of time in the reading room to know what was available and what wasn't. However, my initial experiences in the archives of Colombo left me pondering once more about the institutional red tape. Reflecting on my experiences using the archives between the Hague and Colombo, I can't help but think about the idea of accessibility; this time of a different kind. Navigating a new language was less of an issue in Colombo, yet, archiving methods and processes made it complicated to know what information was available.

Pointing to a lack of resources and structural issues, the lack of metadata, tagging and categories were not in ones favour to assist and support research as it was in the Hague. Here, patience and time would be a virtue if you were to uncover something of relevance. Or else you might be left flipping through dusty, newspaper clippings without much luck.

The National archives are located in an area known as 'Kurunduwatta' (Cinnamon Gardens). There are no cinnamon trees in this upmarket area today. At least, none that I can find. But there is an abundance of mansions, boutiques, and cafes. As I left the building I wondered if perhaps, there might still be a cinnamon tree left standing in this area that was once the center of sprawling Dutch cinnamon plantations.

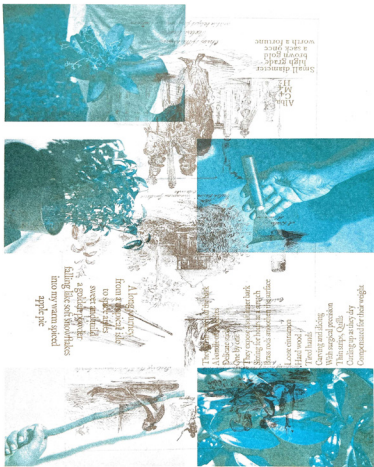


While I have been working digitally with many of the images during my research, I wanted to experiment with printed material. In the image on the left of Figure 16, I paired a poem with photographs of the cinnamon tree to be folded into a small zine. I was trying to play with the materiality of the object and create something that viewers could physically interact with.

I also had the idea of creating a 'scent poster' seen to the right of Figure 16. By adding a drop of cinnamon oil to the poster, I wanted to use the sensorial elements of smelling cinnamon to trigger memories and initiate a conversation with viewers. The image is an archival sketch depicting the many stages of processing cinnamon. By combining recent photographs I made of the cinnamon tree with the archival image, I wanted to create a juxtaposition in visualising and engaging with the cinnamon tree.

For the zine and poster, I experimented with Riso printing techniques.²⁵ I was drawn to the way this technique uses layers of ink and the textural components of the ink on paper. This technical process is similar, in some ways, to the layers of history that I am dealing with in my research and allowed me to find a way of visually depicting the multiple layers within the story.

Although these remain as test prints for now, I hope to explore more ways of engaging with audiences within my research and find effective ways of sharing my process.



25 Riso prints are made with a Risograph printer that uses plant-based inks and function like a photocopier. The prints from this technique produce tactile and vibrant images with unique textures.

Unarchiving through photography.

Photography had not yet been invented when the Dutch first arrived in Sri Lanka in the seventeenth century. However, visual documentation in the form of maps and paintings²⁶ allowed to further the imperial agenda and visually demonstrate life in the colonies.

Paintings, drawings, and maps helped fuel the Dutch colonial gaze of a distant paradise; a place of abundance that was available for exploration and exploitation. Images from this period depict colonial classics - idyllic and expansive scenes of rolling hills, depopulated landscapes and its people as 'natives' in an antique land.

Colonial storytelling is evident when looking at archival records from this period. Dutch archives give us an indication and reference to Dutch knowledge and how this was communicated throughout the colonial empire. When trying to visualise what cinnamon peeling may have looked like during this period, artists would bring to life imaginary terrains and landscapes with a little help from written observations and records that were available.

Upon first glance at Figure 16 you may overlook it. If you know what a cinnamon tree looks like, the detail in the image reveals that it is not a cinnamon tree in shape, form, or size. They are a fabrication of a hybrid tropical tree meant to serve as a representation of cinnamon. The cinnamon peelers are seen engaged in various activities. In the wild, the barks of the trees would be chopped and collected, and the remaining production would take place elsewhere. However, this image shows many steps that hint at the different processes involved in the production of the spice. It is not meant to be an accurate representation of the production methods and steps, rather offer a glimpse of an imagined landscape based on certain truths.

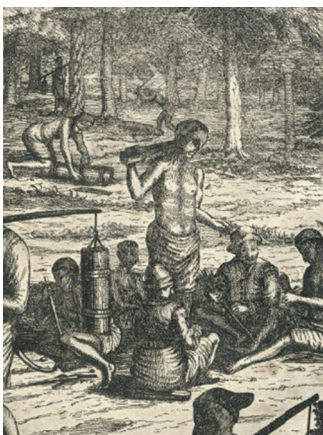
These images raise many questions. Borrowing from Elizabeth Edwards concept of 'critical forensics,' to take a closer reading of the image, it is possible to interrogate the performative quality of these images. What do these visuals suggest about fact and reality, time, space, gaze and agency?²⁷ Aside from its colonial narrative, these are deeper layers that exist within the archival material that make visible the colonial agenda.

²⁶ Such as those from artists like Esaias Boursse, Cornelis Steiger and Jan Brandes.

²⁷ Edwards, Elizabeth. "Facing History". 'Der Geschichte Ins Antlitz Blicken: Fotografie Und Die Herausforderung Der Präsenz'. In Herta Wolf (Ed) Aufzeigen Oder Beweisen? Die Fotografie Als Kulturtechnik Und Medium Des Wissens: p10.



Figure 16: Peeling cinnamon in Ceylon, 1672.



One of the few exceptions to visual documentation from this period are the drawings from 'Tijkenboeck', the sketchbook of Dutch painter, Esaias Boursse.²⁸ The drawings made in 1662 feature a multitude of labourers engaged in different types of work, including cinnamon peeling and offer important evidence of the early days of the VOC in their conquest of Sri Lanka. Many of the sketches appear to have been made in real time, similar to that of a camera shutter capturing an image. In a pre-photographic era, these sketches are different to other artistic drawings from the same period and serve as an eye-witness account, akin to a 'visual journalist',²⁹ offering an important visual component of a past.



Figure 17: Two cinnamon peelers at work, Esaias Boursse (1662).

Much of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Dutch images of colonial empires tell a story of power dynamics based on fragments of reality and truths that supported and furthered a colonial fantasy and vision. Since then, image-making has developed in tandem with technology. Today, the internet and virtual spaces also impact how we relate to certain 'truths' and offers new possibilities for

28 Wagenaar, Lodewijk & Beumer, Mieke. (2019). Esaias Boursse's 'Tijkenboeck': A Pictorial Catalogue of People Working and Living in and around Colombo, 1662. *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*. 67. 312-331. 10.52476/trb.9736.

29 In the book, 'Cinnamon & Elephants: Sri Lanka and the Netherlands from 1600' the author includes an Intermezzo on page 41 titled "Esaias Boursse: A Dutch Artist becomes a visual journalist" due to the role of his drawings as historical documents that illustrate aspects of daily life in Sri Lanka..

documentary forms of storytelling to address this.

While there is not one 'truth' as it stands - it has become imperative to critically engage with historical photographic representations. Through my photographic practice, I aim to interpret visual culture from an intersectional lens using my position as a Sri Lankan woman living in Europe to shed light on certain truths that are relevant to my practice.

Through my process of using material from the archive, I unarchive material from a historical period and build on it in order to reclaim meaning and offer new ways of seeing this material. Additionally, considering the affordances offered by the archive as bridge from the past to the present, and future to approach ways of looking, understanding and learning.

As I was trying to make sense of the images I have been collecting, making, and working with, I was faced with certain challenges. I am working with material from the archives in the present day. From the position of a photographer, I was unsure how to bridge the old and the new in order to work with and respond to the visual archive.

In her photographic works such as 'Errata' and 'Unshowable Photographs', Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, intervenes in archives in an attempt to reverse colonial knowledge.³⁰ She enacts visual interventions such as cutting, tracing, drawing and folding photographs to highlight themes of juxtapositions and erasure, among other things. Through these interventions, Azoulay responds to and confronts imperial structures and gestures that prevail in archives and photographic documents. While these are important strategies when approaching visual archives, I am choosing to go beyond existing visual material and make new images to find a way of creating a dialogue between the past and present. Since my position informs much of my process, I am able to insert a personal narrative by making images that respond to and reflect inconsistencies I find in historical material, whilst also giving me an opportunity to comment about contemporary issues.

South African Artist and Photographer Lebohang Kganye is known for her photographic montages with archives where she seamlessly intertwines narratives of the past, present, reality and fiction. Kganye's approach investigates history and memory through large-scale collage installations. I'm particularly interested in how she draws from shared oral narratives and fictional-based texts and juxtaposes photographs and film and weave her personal story with

³⁰ Rahaab Allana. Potential Worlds: Interacting with Prof. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, PIX magazine, accessed 5th March 2024, <http://www.enterpix.in/pix-post/a-potential-world-conversations-with-prof-ariella-aisha-azoulay/>.

collective memory. While Kganye's work such as 'Two stories of (hi) stories' and 'In search of memory' are explored in three dimensional installations, I was intrigued by her approach of 'staging memories' and how she uses these methods to talk about layered histories of colonialism.

I was challenged by the ways of depicting the many layers of history, imaginaries, and contexts into my visual process. I have, therefore, begun experimenting with collages that allow me to layer archival imagery with documentary-style photographs I have taken. By layering the past and present, I am blending these elements to create a composite image that juxtaposes the tensions and hidden violence embedded in the archives and landscapes.



In the photomontage above I have taken an archival image of cinnamon gardens in Colombo, once a thriving cinnamon plantation, as the backdrop. In the centre I have layered a cutout from a colonial-era statue that still stands outside the Grand Orient Hotel in Colombo today depicting a woman carrying a (white, European) man. To the far right I have added a cutout of a Dutch house in cinnamon gardens from the book 'Ceylonese Sketches' by Sri Lankan Dutch-Burgher artist, J.L.K. van Dort made in 1883.

Through this process of physically cutting and re-arranging visual

material, I have created a synthesised image that bends time by blending different time periods within a single frame. I hope to direct audiences to the dimensionality of the topic and evoke post-colonial reflections of this historical period. By manipulating, playing and editing images in this way to, I want to recreate their meaning, and have these photomontages serve as a powerful tool for social, historical and cultural commentary that fuse together fictional elements and reality.

Collaging and remixing material in this way allows me to contribute to the field of knowledge on history and culture using visual mediums to address both colonial amnesia and nostalgia. While certain elements of our past have been erased or forgotten, this is as a direct response to recognising this and finding alternate ways of remembering and acknowledging these events through a process of unarchiving.



Hoemen de CANEEL Ichtil opt

CEYLON.

1795

Bb 2

At what point does culture lose its authenticity and become performative?

Is it an inevitable outcome of years of colonialism and more recently, tourism? Places, people and experiences on offer, eagerly waiting to be consumed.



Figure 18: An assortment of tools used for peeling Ceylon cinnamon

Can histories be colonised even in our imagination?

A soft breeze moves through the air and birds chirp loudly. Gentle ripples dance on the calm water. Egrets fly low in the sky swooping down onto the lush mangroves dotting the many islands. A motorboat bobs on the side of a jetty. On the horizon fishing boats lay nets in preparation for harvesting lagoon shrimp and fish.

I'm at the edge of the Madu ganga with Suranga, our tour guide for the day. "There are over sixty four islands here", says Suranga, of which around four are inhabited. Aside from being an important Ramsar wetland habitat, these islands are famous for their cinnamon tours. Boat safaris attract throngs of foreign and local tourists that come to the southwestern coast of Sri Lanka for a day out on the water visiting mangroves, cinnamon plantations and if they fancy, a fish spa.

We head out early, while the sun is low in the sky and there are fewer boats on the open water. The tour takes us through the mangrove forests towards the smallest island known as 'satha paha' (five cent) island that houses a shrine built over 300 years ago. Inside the small shrine sits a temple with statues of two Hindu gods. According to folklore this islet was purchased for five cents, while others say the name was derived from its shape. I spot an engraving of multiple heads inside the shrine. These heads are carved into the shrine above the statue and seem as if they could be from the colonial-era as they don't fit with the Hindu deities.

Could this shrine have existed while the Dutch were here? It's difficult to know.

When asking locals in the area, there seems to be a haziness in recalling some of these histories. More often than not, Sri Lanka's extensive history as a colonised territory gets entangled with Portuguese, Dutch and British periods becoming one convoluted and obscure past.

We visit an island named the 'cinnamon miracle' where a cinnamon peeler sits on the floor with traditional tools used for peeling cinnamon. He sits inside a wattle and daub structure surrounded by banners displaying the benefits of cinnamon and the differences between true cinnamon and the 'fake' kind. Steaming hot cinnamon

tea is served and the demonstration begins.

We are told about the peeling process and shown how sweet-smelling cinnamon is skilfully extracted from the bark of a tree. The peeler talks about the various uses of the bark, leaves and the diverse products extracted from the cinnamon tree. Oils, powders, incense sticks, shampoos and other items you can conveniently purchase at the end of the tour. The sound from the engine of a boat arriving cuts through the conversation and he hurriedly wraps up the tour.

“Another boat has arrived” he says. And points us in the direction of the souvenir shop.

Cinnamon island was a real place, yet it felt as if it was selling something fictional. The complex history of the spice and the artisanal peeling techniques had been reduced to a performance; an experience for visitors to be consumed.

I inquire about oral histories related to the craft of cinnamon peeling. Oral traditions and histories were an important form of knowledge production and storytelling in Sri Lanka. They served as an archive relying on aspects of memory, locality, language and tradition creating vast repositories of historical and cultural information told through songs, poems and folk tales. I hoped that if I could find hints of this period through oral histories, I could perhaps find another perspective besides that of the Dutch VOC.

To my surprise, and perhaps naivety, I was met with blank stares. There appeared to be a general lack of knowledge about the history of cinnamon and the evolution of labour and peeling over the centuries. Some believed that it was the Portuguese that brought the cinnamon tree to Sri Lanka, while others were not concerned with the origins, and spoke at length about the economy of the cinnamon industry today.

I left feeling frustrated because I thought I was going to be able to better understand how my history was remembered. I hoped to encounter cultural traces of pre-colonial life, indigenous sources of history. I was searching for a pure and untainted form of knowledge, but was that even possible following such prolonged exposure to colonial systems? Neo-colonial nostalgia, which in itself is a tool of the colonial regime, appeared to be deeply rooted within the memory of this culture and landscape. My expectations and projections of what I had hoped to uncover had perhaps made me romanticise certain elements of my own past.

Following these experiences, I was compelled to find ways of incorporating oral storytelling techniques into my practice as a way of offering another perspective to that of the VOC archives. Through a short video essay, I explore the role of oral history in re-contextualising colonial legacies by sharing personal vignettes of my journey during my research process. Through this audio-visual excerpt I hope to unpack the ways in which oral storytelling may contribute to the notion of unarchiving and bridging the past and present through visual media.

The cinnamon industry in Sri Lanka is changing rapidly. Today the country is the second largest producer of cinnamon in the world,³¹ with growth only expected to increase. The traditional peeling on the islands is slowly being replaced by mechanised forms of production in factories with cinnamon training institutes popping up in many parts of the country. And with this, the knowledge being held with the cinnamon peelers, their memory and processes will once again be transformed, leading to a loss of these knowledge systems.



Figure 19: Still from my video essay, 'Cinnamologus'.

31 Cinnamon in Sri Lanka, Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed 10th March 2024, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/cinnamon/reporter/lka>.



60 CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Can looking at images in a new way help us reframe histories?

My interest in this topic of research began as a series of reflections and experiences after moving to the Netherlands. I was surprised by the absence of Dutch-Sri Lankan history in mainstream narratives on the Dutch colonial empire that I encountered, which differed greatly from my experiences growing up in Sri Lanka. From this position of questioning how histories are understood, engaged with and remembered, I embark on a journey that examines nearly four hundred and twenty two years to recount violent histories and forgotten stories from this period.

Using my personal experiences living between both countries as a trigger for my practice, along with the historical importance of cinnamon, I illustrate possibilities of reframing the past in order to engage with urgent questions of the present.

Dutch archives, libraries and museums are filled with records, old books, drawings, prints, artefacts and objects related to or originating from Sri Lanka. Using the archives as a base to contextualise this history, I work with pre-photographic visual documentation from the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and documentary photographs I have made to bring these visuals from different eras together to unarchive colonial narratives.

In my response to the historical materials, I unarchive images as a way to offer new meaning and explore how visual media can be used as a field of knowledge to address colonial legacies and the wider context of historical, social, and cultural relationships between the Netherlands and Sri Lanka.

The stories told in my practice and writing meld the personal and political through research and visual storytelling in order to reflect on questions that must be addressed today to ensure that we acknowledge and confront our history in a way that our future no longer looks like that of our colonial past.

The research process includes material gathered from interviews, field trips, and archives in the Netherlands and Sri Lanka. Through my practice, I address some of the inconsistencies and gaps that I encounter within archival landscapes and contemporary dialogues on Dutch-Sri Lankan colonial history. It proposes re-contextualisation and attention to that which has been imagined, hidden and misrepresented from official records by revealing certain blind spots in how

our colonial past is told and maintained.

While I do not unpack why these blind spots exist in my research, I focus on acknowledging how and why the consequences of incomplete histories are important to me. By drawing comparisons between both countries, I critique the colonial romanticism and amnesia to highlight what aspects of our knowledge and heritage may have been lost in the process.

I encourage people engaging with the research to view histories with more scepticism, curiosity, and more critical point of view. The work also offers space for audiences to question official histories, disrupt the power structures embedded in archives, and explore the radical possibilities of alternative narratives. The project will function as a starting point for a reflection on power, narrative distortion, erasure, gaze, resistance, and representation.

While working on this ongoing research, I stumbled upon challenges and opportunities. Something that I would like to explore further is the role of oral history as a form of knowledge production and archive. In the next phase of my research, I intend to explore oral histories and oral forms of storytelling together with speculative narratives to contribute to the process of unarchiving and bridging the past and present using visual media. By developing the video essay into a long-form documentary, I will build on the existing material and use encounters during my research to unpack the emerging role of tourism as a neo-colonial phenomenon and how it is contributing to Dutch heritage tourism in Sri Lanka.

I view this research as an ongoing dialogue that will feed into a larger body of work through which I will continue to engage with beyond the master's programme. Over the course of the last few months I have collected, made, and worked with images to reclaim colonial narratives by suggesting alternate ways of looking at a shared history that has been overlooked and underrepresented. I believe that this process of unarchiving within my research is important in bridging pre-photographic history to the present day in a contemporary society where images are integral to our historical awareness and how we relate to aspects of our heritage, identity and culture.




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