

A Clash of Cultures - A Comparative Analysis of Portuguese, Dutch and British Burgherdom in Sri Lanka and Australia

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The expansion and impact of Western colonization saw the dominance of Portugal in the East during the 16th century. Portuguese occupation and colonization of the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka in 1505, resulted in a 'Clash Of Cultures'- European versus Asian in every sense of the political, social, religious, language, cultural and economic spectrum. However, Portugal's policy of colonization resulted in miscegenation and produced 'mixed breeds' of races in their occupied colonies. Sri Lanka was no exception.

Over time, the Dutch merchant investors from Holland attained sea borne power domination and defeated the Portuguese in the East, taking over the monopoly of the spice trade. In the process, they re-defined Dutch colonial policy and identity, which saw the emergence of Ceylonese Dutch Burgherdom in Sri Lanka. When the Dutch capitulated to the British in 1796, it was an era that marked a watershed in Dutch Burgher ethnic identity and reconstruction of identity, which became largely British cultural identification by race.

After 1945, the immigration to Australia of Ceylonese Dutch-British Burghers who had formed a 'colonial elite' in Ceylon is largely a post-Second World War phenomenon. Almost all of this entire ethnic group removed themselves from Ceylonese society in just over two decades to settle in other Commonwealth countries, principally Australia, England and Canada. However, the major part of the ethnic community came to Australia, particularly to Victoria, and more specifically to Melbourne. This city location was the focal point, where between 50-60 % of Dutch Burgher migrants settled permanently. It is with this group that the paper is concerned. The paper will also address the experiences of an ex-colonial elite, now living in multi-cultural Australian society, without the patronage or protection of a colonial power. The question of a distinct identity and a changing ethnic identity will also be considered within the context of Anglo- Australian society. Some aspects of Ceylonese Dutch Burgherdom and contributions to Australian and also Sri Lankan society will be highlighted. Finally, the paper will analyse the Sri Lankan aspects of the Burghers left behind and their interpretation and re-construction of Burgher identity, after the 'Diaspora' to Australia post -1945.

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