

# People of the early Cape: What VOC<sup>1</sup> documents reveal

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<sup>1</sup> VOC: Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (Dutch East India Company)

# **PEOPLE OF THE EARLY CAPE: WHAT VOC DOCUMENTS REVEAL**

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## 0. IT'S ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

For various reasons people from Western Europe as well as the Far East arrived at the early Cape of Good Hope. Many Westerners served in the local VOC structure, while the Easterners arrived mainly as slaves or exiles. While disseminating the material contained in certain series of VOC documents vested in the Cape Town Archives notes were made of certain individuals who made an impression on the inquiring mind. It was surprising to see how much information could be gathered from these series in order to conduct case studies, for our purpose Angela of Bengalen, the royal princes Loring Passir and Dipa Nagera of Java, Nicolaas Ondatje of Colombo and Manuel Thuart of Tutucurin, complemented by a case study of the French refugee, Prieur du Plessis, a Protestant Christian. The fact is that these people who honoured different religious beliefs, enriched the contents of the various cases.

The research material was mostly extracted from the following transcribed VOC series of the 17th and 18th century: Resolutions of the Cape Council of Policy, inventories and auction rolls of intestate papers, muster rolls and “bandietenrollen”. The latter are actually name-lists of convicts and exiles who were sent to the Cape, in many cases accompanied by the verdict of their court cases and sentence. As the religious status of the convicts and exiles was often mentioned or could be derived from the contents, it could be established that there were Christians, Muslims and Hindus amongst them.

	<b>Status</b>	<b>Individual</b>	<b>Religion</b>
1.	Slave	Angela of Bengal, India	Hindu, converted Christian
2.	Exile	Loring Passer, Materam Kingdom, Java	Muslim, and his brother
3.	Exile	Dipa Nagera, Materam Kingdom, Java	Muslim
4.	Convict	Nicolaas Ondaatje, Colombo, Ceylon	St. Thomas Christian
5.	Convict	Manuel Thuart, Tutucurin, India	<i>parrua</i> , St. Thomas Christian
6.	Refugee	Prieur du Plessis, France	Huguenot Christian

## 1. SLAVES

### 1.1 INTRODUCTORY NOTES

As there was so much work to be done in this young and growing settlement, the continuous development and expansion caused an ever-increasing demand for labour. Some of the Khoi could only occasionally be used as harvesters and herdsmen. Since there were far too few VOC officials and free burghers to do all the work, the only way to solve the problem was to make use of slave labour. They were in great demand throughout the Cape Colony.

The slaves came mainly from the islands of Indonesia, Bengal in the north-western part of India, the Indian Coast of Coromandel, Malaysia, Madagascar and the coasts of Africa, such as Guinea, Angola and Mozambique. According to the slave traders and owners the slaves from Madagascar were excellent at agriculture, while the Angolanese slaves could do very hard work. The slaves from India and some places in Indonesia were much appreciated for their abilities as craftspeople.

After their manumission the slave men and women from Bengal were the group who adapted most successfully to the Cape community. The first manumitted slave women were Katrina, Maria and Angela, all of Bengal.

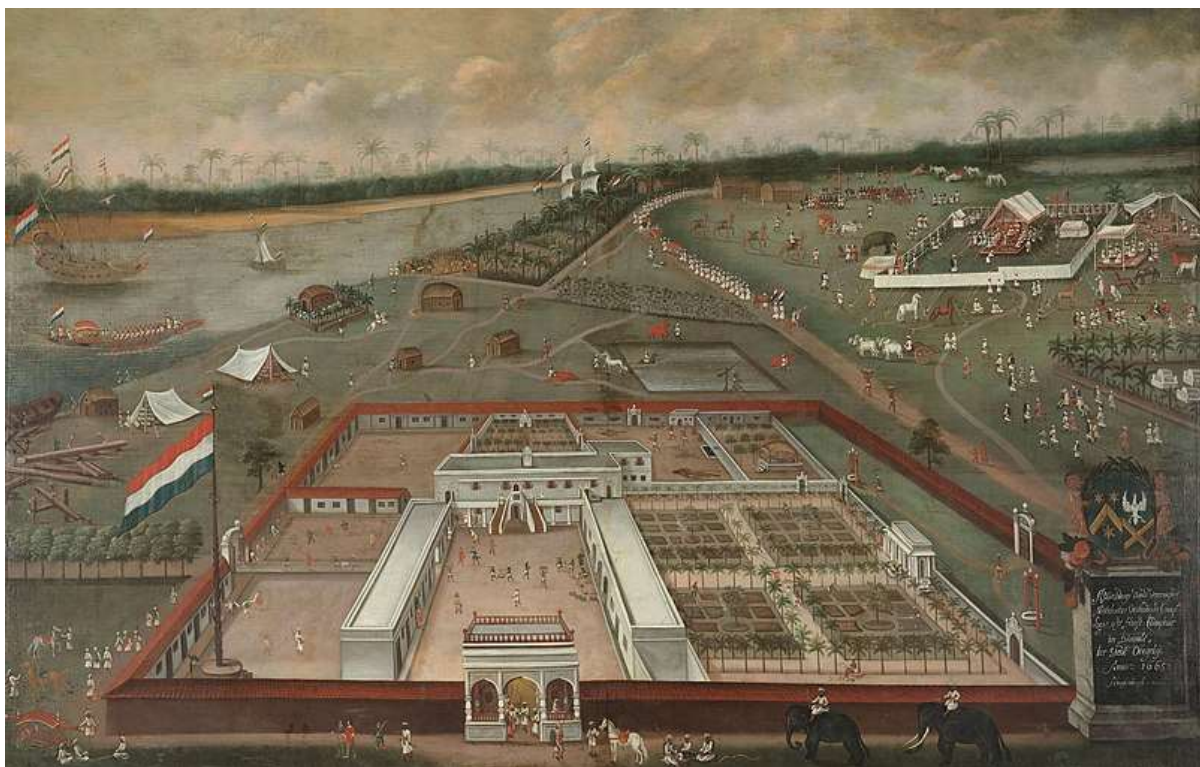
It often happened that male and female slaves applied for manumission and that these requests were then submitted to the Council. A slave, male or female, would receive their letter of freedom on condition that they had been baptised, could speak Dutch, and could either present a healthy and capable male slave to the Company to take their place or pay the Company the amount equal to the value of a strong young male slave.

## 1.2 CASE STUDY OF ANGELA VAN BENGALLEN

### 1.2.1 Introductory notes

Bengal was a directorate of the Dutch East India Company in Mughal Bengal between 1610 until the company's liquidation in 1800. It then became a colony of the Kingdom of the Netherlands until 1825, when it was relinquished to the British according to the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824.

Dutch presence in the region started by the establishment of a trading post at Pipili in the mouth of Subarnarekha river in Odisha. The former colony is part of what is today called Dutch India. 50% of textiles and 80% of silks were imported from Bengal to the Dutch Empire.



1. Trade lodge of the VOC in Hooghly, Bengal, by Hendrik van Schuylenbergh (ca. 1620-1689), oil on canvas, 1665. Left is the river Ganges with a few ships.

### **1.2.2 From slave to free woman**

Angela, her husband Domingo and their three children had been kidnapped by slave-raiders from the Ganges delta area, their north-east India homeland known as Bengal. VOC Commander Pieter Kemp, a free burgher from Batavia, who had also been a landdrost there, sold Angela and her children to Jan van Riebeeck and his wife in 1655. They were brought via Batavia to the Cape on board of the VOC ship *Amersfoort*, which was part of the fleet that had set sail from Batavia in December 1656 and arrived in Table Bay late February 1657. This was before the first official slave consignments to the Cape had been sanctioned later in 1657.

Jan van Riebeeck sold Angela and her children to Abraham Gabbema just before the Van Riebeeck family boarded ship for Batavia in April 1662. In the bill of sale no mention is made of Angela's three children, but as Gabbema later liberated her children, they must have been included in the deal. Neither Angela's age nor the price involved was mentioned.

Gabbema, who was second in command at the Cape, was promoted to Batavia. Before leaving, he signed a document in April 1666 which was the last year of Zacharias Wagenaer's governance, liberating Angela and her children out of goodwill ("uit puijre genegentheijt"). Before he left he asked Thomas Christoffel Muller to look after her for the first six months after his departure. Soon after having gained her freedom Angela asked for and was granted a plot of land in the Heerestraat.

On 29 April 1668 she made the full transition to burgher society by being baptised as a Christian. On 15 December 1669, Angela married the free burger Arnoldus Willemsz Basson and thus became a member of the community of free persons. She eventually became the progenitress of the Basson Family of South Africa.

### **1.2.3 Angela and her children**

During her lifetime Angela gave birth to 14 children from 4 different fathers:

- 3 sons with first husband Domingo in Bengal
- 4 children born from 2 extra-marital relationships at the Cape while a slave woman, the one relationship was with a De Koning (a son and a daughter), the other with Jan van Asse (two sons)
- 4 sons and 3 daughters with second husband Arnoldus Basson.

While Angela was still in slavery her daughter Anna de Koning was born. Apart from being very attractive Anna was also well educated and her signature in a firm hand appears on a number of documents. She was married to Captain Oloff Bergh and in her turn became the progenitress of the Bergh family of South Africa.





2. Anna de Koningh's portrait is the only one of a former slave of this period that still exists today ([www.snipview.com](http://www.snipview.com))



3. Portrait of Lieutenant Olof Bergh  
([www.e-family.co.za](http://www.e-family.co.za))

Olof Bergh who was born to a cadet branch of a Swedish noble house in 1643 in Goteborg, Sweden and joined the VOC in 1665. He served in Batavia and Ceylon before arriving at the Cape in 1670, where he became a prominent and wealthy member of the community. He enjoyed a close relationship with Commander and later Governor Simon van der Stel.

### 1.2.4 Prosperous and respected

Angela, who was often called “Maai Ansiela”<sup>2</sup>, continued to live the life of a prosperous and respected member of early Cape society, even after Basson died in 1698. Now and then she attended an auction of a deceased estate and on one occasion did what a loving granny would do by buying some “poppegoed”, (doll stuff) probably for one or more of her little granddaughters.

She died in 1720, having lived well into her late 70s. At the time of her death Arnoldus Basson’s original estate of 6494 guilders, had more than doubled thanks to her skilful management and at the time amounted to over 15000 guilders. This was besides her property in Table Valley, livestock, slaves and the small farm Hondswijck in Drakenstein. Angela also owned the farm Kronendal in Hout Bay.

## 2. POLITICAL EXILES AS PRISONERS

### 2.1 INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Many royals from the East were banned to the Cape after having been sentenced by one of the VOC courts situated in Batavia, Nagapatnam, Colombo, Jassanapatnam, Samarang, Gale or Cheribon.

- If they were regarded as dangerous they were sent to Robben Island as political prisoners of state because of the danger of giving these Indian “grooten” (great ones) even the slightest opportunity to move among the large number of slaves from the East and inciting them to misdeeds.
- Other exiles from the East were allowed to live either in the Cape settlement or its districts.

Colleague Ebrahim Salie (2017) compiled a list of Indonesian aristocrats, scholars and scribes who were exiled to the Cape, including the following:

Rajah of Tambora, Sultan Nissa Nudum Abdul Rassa (1797 & 1714)  
The brothers Pangerang Suryakasuma (alias Saloringpasar [Loringh Passir] and Pangerang Dipanagagara, both of the Kingdom of Mataram  
Dain Mamouti, Prince of Ternaaten (1722)  
Radja Boekit, former Regent of Padang (1749)  
Raden Djoerit of Madura (1749)  
Prince Minte of Ternaaten (1766)  
Eugenius Monoppo, former King of Boelang and Mongodo (1769)  
Prince Achmat, the Sultan of Xullabes (1775)

and Muslim scribes and scholars, such as the revered Shaykh Yusuf (1694).

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<sup>2</sup> Duth *maai* is a derivation of *moei* ‘aunt’, a pet name for ‘mother’ (1st time documented in Dutch in 1201-1250) (WNT).



## **2.2 CASE STUDY OF PANGERANG LORING PASSER AND HIS BROTHER PANGERANG DIPA NAGARA**

Two of the best-known exiles were “pangerang” (prince) Dipa Nagara who was banished to the Cape in 1723, preceded by his elder brother “pangerang” Suryakasuma (alias Saloringpasar or Loringh Passir/Passer) who arrived at the Cape in 1715.

*Pangerang* was a title of nobility in Java, also adopted here and there in Malay countries, as a rule only held by sons or brothers of ruling monarchs and then mostly translated as prince.

### **2.2.1 Some historial facts**

The story begins during the reign of the pro-VOC Emperor Pakubuwana of Soerakarta on Java. Through an agreement between the VOC and Mataram rulers, the VOC increased its power through assertion of its authority over large tracts of Javanese land, as well as trade concessions, and the extension of its military presence in Java via construction of castles and garrisons. The agreement occurred as a result of VOC military assistance to Emperor Pakubuwana during the First Javanese War of Succession.

### **2.2.2 Loring Passer at Stellenbosch**

However, no unanimous consensus was reached among the members of the Mataram aristocracy regarding the agreement with the VOC. To some, like Pangerang Loringh Passir who was one of the emperor’s sons, that agreement had led to a sizable portion of Javanese interests and territory being compromised. Consequently, the Muslim Kingdom of Mataram now became a semi-independent, vassal state of VOC Batavia. Hence, Pangerang Loring Passir and his followers repudiated this encroachment on Muslim soil by an “infidel” power.

A feud soon erupted between Pangerang Loringh Passir and his father. Loring Passer had taken refuge in Semarang and was therefore accused by his father of supporting anti-Dutch Surabaya aristocrats, and of corroborating with Balinese insurgents. His father authorised his execution, which was later converted to him being exiled directly to the Cape.

Loring Passir was banished together with his mother, two wives, mother-in-law, and eleven servants from the Island of Edam (in the Batavia roadstead) to the Cape to serve a life-long sentence. They arrived in Table Bay late in 1715 on the westbound bound ship, Gansenhoeff.

In February 1716 the pangerang and his people were escorted to his assigned abode in Stellenbosch, which was the house and erf of the former heemraad Daniel Pheil. It was purchased for 1 500 Dutch Guilders, in accordance with the dictates of VOC authorities in Batavia from VOC coffers by local colonists of wealth and power.

According to the description in the documents it was possible to determine where the erf and house were situated, which could be established as between the Braak and the Eerste River:



#### *4. De Braak, Stellenbosch*

The Loring Passer household was supplied by the VOC with 520 lb of rice per month at cost price. It was an important part of VOC strategy to leave intact the dietary habits, cultural and religious customs and practises of political aristocrats exiled to the Cape, in return for their obedience. Also, the house in Stellenbosch had the Eerste Rivier running nearby, so as to supply them with water at all times as required by their nation.

Furthermore, as with other exiles, it seemed that the VOC allowed the private practise of Islam within the confines of Passer's residence in Stellenbosch, as no evidence could be found to the contrary, of the VOC's enforcement of the Christian faith on eastern exiles.

Loring Passer's name appeared in the Resolutions for the first time in 1719, then also in 1722, 1731, and 1732 and in 1737 with a notice about his death. In June 1737 it was minuted that all the necessary arrangements had been made to send his mortal remains, as well as his two wives, children and servants (17 people in all) back to Batavia.

#### **2.2.3 Dipa Nagara joining his brother at the Cape**

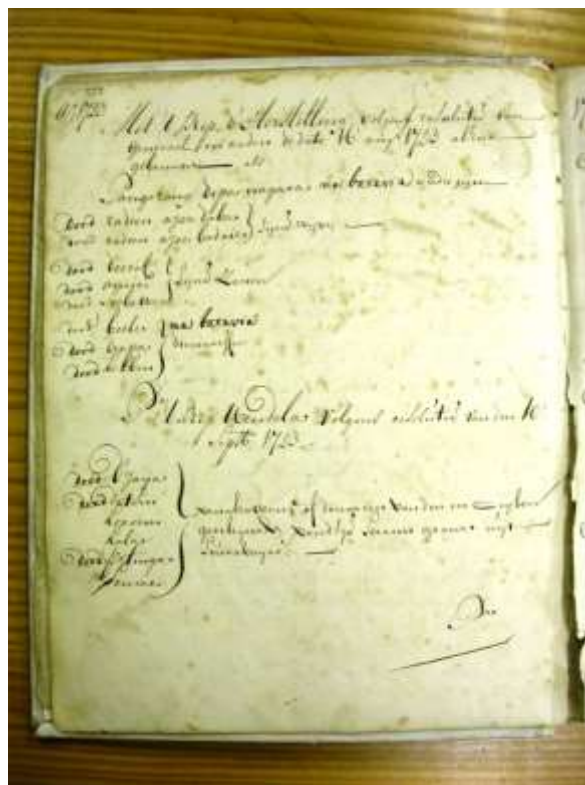
Dipa, also Dipati was the name of the ruler of the first order on Java and may be regarded as a regal title.

In 1717, two years after Loring Passer was banished, rebellion was spread in Java by the Lords of Surabaya and Madura against emperor Pakubuwana I, who called upon one of his sons, Pangerang Dipa Nagara, to quell the strife east of Kartasura. Instead, Dipa Nagara and his brother Dipa Santah, joined the rebellion in the Balinese strongholds in the mountain area of Eastern Java that was ruled by royals who were vehemently anti-VOC. Dipa Nagara felt that he could narrow the political fissure between the royal palace at Kartasura and the rebels, and between Islam and Hindu-Buddhist ideas still prevalent in Bali.

A full-scale rebellion soon occurred, when the princes of the Kartasura palace, which included Dipa Nagara and other Islamic leaders of the palace, rebelled against the appointment of the pro-VOC Amangkurat IV on the death of their father Susuhanan, as successor to the throne.

They appealed unsuccessfully to Amangkurat IV to sever his ties with the VOC. The rebellion collapsed and by late June 1723 pangerang Dipa Nagara and other rebels had surrendered to VOC authorities and he was exiled to the Cape.

According to an extract from the secret resolutions of the Castle of Batavia issued in August 1723, it was ruled that Dipa Nagara, who was of a quite different and less important stature than Loring Passir, together with his family and entourage would be exiled to the Cape without delay.



##### *5. Dipa Nagara and his entourage*

When Dipa Nagara and his entourage arrived at the Cape in 1723 they had to join the household of his brother in Stellenbosch. The VOC was obliged to provide the exiled royals with housing, give them a monthly allowance and supply some food rations, such as rice.

While Dipa Nagara lived in Stellenbosch he attended at least two auctions where he bought the following items: 1 copper coffee pot; 2 infusing vessels made of pewter; 1 copper mortar with its pestle and 1 piece of striped silk material, and at the second 1 copper canister and 2 copper buckets.

Dipa Nagara survived his years of banishment, and although the date of his return was not mentioned, it was stated in the applicable document that he returned to the East, with a calculated guess that it could have been in the late 1750s.

### 3. CONVICTS OF THE VOC

#### 3.1 Introductory notes

Next on the list are two St. Thomas Christians, namely Nicolaas Ondaatje and Manuel Thuart, who were accused of having committed minor crimes for which they were sentenced in Colombo and then banished to the Cape.

#### 3.2 St. Thomas Christians

According to tradition, Thomas the Apostle came to Muziris on the Kerala coast in 52 AD, which is in present-day Pattanam, Kerala.

The Cochin Jews are known to have existed in Kerala in the 1st century AD, and it was possible for an Aramaic-speaking Jew, such as St. Thomas from Galilee, to make a trip to Kerala then. The earliest known source connecting the Apostle to India is the *Acts of Thomas*, likely written in the early 3rd century, perhaps in Edessa.



6. Archival painting of St. Thomas

A number of 3rd and 4th century Roman writers also mentioned St. Thomas' trip to India, including Ambrose of Milan, Gregory of Nazianzus, Jerome, and Ephrem the Syrian.

According to legend, the community began with Thomas's conversion of four Brahmin families, named as Pakalomattom, Sankarapuri, Kaliyankal and Kalli. Some members of the St. Thomas Christian community observed Brahmin customs in the Middle Ages, such as the wearing of the sacred thread<sup>3</sup>.

An organised Christian presence in India dates to the arrival of East Syrian settlers and missionaries from Persia, members of what would become the Church of the East, in around the 3rd century. The group known as the Northists claim descent from the early Christians evangelized by Thomas the Apostle.

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<sup>3</sup> Sacred thread: a cotton thread with which a Hindu youth of the three twice-born castes and some Sudras is invested at the ceremony of initiation (as at the age of from eight to twelve) and which is worn constantly thereafter from the left shoulder across the body to the right

In 883 the English king Alfred the Great reportedly sent a mission and gifts to Saint Thomas' tomb in India. During the Crusades, distorted accounts of the Saint Thomas Christians and the Nestorian Church gave rise to the European legend of Prester John.

The St. Thomas Christians first encountered the Portuguese in 1498, during the expedition of Vasco da Gama. The two groups quickly formed an alliance. The Portuguese had a keen interest in entrenching themselves in the spice trade and in spreading their version of Christianity and they gained the upper hand, which caused a split in the local church.

### 3.3 CASE STUDY OF NICOLAS ONDAATJE

#### 3.3.1 *Introductory notes*

A case worth mentioning is that of Nicolas Ondaatje of Colombo, who was described as a “chittij”<sup>4</sup> (cashier) and former “cannecappul”<sup>5</sup> (writer, book-keeper and interpreter) of the honourable preacher Joan Bernhard Noordbeek. He and another Christian, Pattenaike Appoehami<sup>6</sup>, who was a senior master at the “Maturees Appohamijs school”, arrived with the Huijs Assenburg in 1728.



7. Map of Colombo, Sri Lanka

<sup>4</sup> *Chittij*: The name in Further India for members of the merchant caste; a person belonging to a group of people in the banking business, thus a cashier, a banker; it appears that they could belong to different castes, but would follow the same regimen; merchant castes of Indian origin in Ceylon were known as Colom chetties. In the eighteenth century there were Hindu, Catholic and Protestant chitties [also: chettair, chetty, sitti]

<sup>5</sup> *Cannecapul*: indigenous scribe, bookkeeper, administrative official, also an interpreter on the Coromandel coast

<sup>6</sup> *Appoehami*: Cingalese title for a man of good heritage and a honourable title for the sons of important men in the community.



### 3.3.2 Sentence and life at the Cape

According to the sentence passed in 1727 by the Council of Justice at the Castle in Colombo they were both banished to the Cape for ten years. According to a later note written in the margin they died here while serving their sentences (CJ3186). In Ondaatje's case this can be verified by his inventory dated 2 September 1737 and his auction list dated 5 November 1737 (MOOC10/4.154 and 155 respectively). He had very few possessions, of which one lot was sold at the house of Jacob van Rhenen and the second lot on the farm of Daniel Walters. The latter, consisting of 1 pair of trousers, 1 jacket, 1 handkerchief and 2 books, was bought by Hendrik Debits for 1:7 rixdollars.



8. MOOC10/4.154: Inventory, 2 September 1737



9. MOOC10/4.155: Auction list, 5 November 1737

### 3.3.3 Documents tell about the man

One of the files from the MOOC14 series partially indexed during the TEPC Project contains letters and other documents revealing much about his personal life during the nine years of his stay at the Cape. The documents written by Ondaatje were done in a neat and orderly manner, while his steady handwriting bears evidence of a well-educated man. From his correspondence it is clear that he was fluent in Dutch, both written and spoken; he was a teacher who gave lessons to the De Jager children in the district and was a respected free man at the Cape. In the documents written in Western script he is referred to as the “vrijswart Nicolaas Ondatie van Colombo”, his name and surname being spelt here as written by himself. (Recent research revealed that his surname is of Tamil origin.)



### 3.3.4 Letters between Colombo, Gale and the Cape

One of the most precious findings of the file is the sub-file containing incoming letters from Colombo and Gale listed annually from 1728 to 1735, ...” in other words, neatly sorted according to date. Nearly all these letters are written in Singalese, “a rather aberrant form of Indo-aryan in the southern part of Ceylon” (Parlett, page 113). In the upper left-hand corner of each letter Ondaatje wrote in Western script the name of the sender and the person’s place of residence, inter alia ‘from my mother Joliana Ondatie Colombo’, ‘from Philip Jurgen Ondatje Colombo’, ‘from Matthijs Jurgen Ondatje Colombo’, ‘from Tomis Christoffel Colombo’, ‘from my mother Juliana Roderigo van Colombo’, ‘from Willim Jurgen Ondatje Colombo 17 3/18 30’ and ‘from Evert Perera Gale’ (MOOC14/8).



10. Nicolas Ondaatje 1728-1737 (MOOC14/8)  
Collection of letters by family and friends. Miniature Memorie booklet.

Evidence of another Ondatie visiting the Cape of Good Hope.

VC 1757:  
Sondag 15, 23, Voor 't overige hebben de met de  
scheepen Roosenburg en Wiltrijk al  
hier gearriveerde en voor 't eijland Ceij  
=lon gedestineerde predicanten Wil  
=lem Jurriaan Ondatie en Hendrik  
Philips, op deesen dag des Heeren  
de Christelijke gemeijnte en Godes  
heijlig woord onderweesen.

### 3.4 CASE STUDY OF MANUEL THUART

#### 3.4.1 Introductory notes

One of the most intriguing adventures belongs to Manuel Doeart who arrived in 1747 on the Scheijbeek (CJ3186). His name was often mentioned in the Resolutions of the Council of Policy, where it was written as Manuel Thiar/Thuart. In the “Bandietenrollen” his surname/family name was written as Doewart (CJ2564, CJ3188), Doeart (CJ3188) Duart (CJ3188) Doual and even Manuel van Douart, as if it referred to a place name (CJ2568).

#### 3.4.2 A “parrua” from Tutucorin

Manuel was a Company prisoner who stayed in the slave lodge. He belonged to the “parrua” caste, a group of local inhabitants who were St. Thomas Christians and followers of the Syrian church in India. The parruas came from the coast of Madurai, also Madura, and specialised in pearl diving.

Tuticorin is situated in South Tamil Nadu in South India at the Gulf of Mannar. It developed from a small fishing village into a flourishing Portuguese colony in the 16th century and further expanded after the Dutch took power in 1658. Due to its once thriving natural pearl diving industry Tuticorin is still known as Muthu Nagaram “Pearl City”, the city of pearls.



11. Tuticorin indicated in white circle

### **3.4.3 Sentenced to the Cape**

On 19 Julie 1746 five “paruassen”, including Doewart, had been sentenced in Castle of Colombo to be flogged, branded, chained and banned to the Cape for 25 years. They were accused of having plundered the pearl banks and trying to sell the pearl oysters at Namenadewaran (CJ2564). Parrua Manuel Doeart was expected to earn his own living at the Cape and serve as a Company diver (1761, CJ3189).

### **3.4.4 The Governor and the convict**

In 1755 Manuel had his chance to show his skill when the ship *Deunisveld* developed a leakage near its keel on the starboard side and the officials did not know how to restore it. They realised that they needed the services of a capable diver to look for the leakage under water. They remembered Manuel Thuart who was considered the right person for the job.

On two consecutive days he dived 7 times, staying under water between 5 to 6 minutes to obtain a good look at both sides of the ship. According to him the crevice in the hull could be repaired from the inside. Because Thuart acquitted himself so well of that task the Council of Policy decided that he would no longer be regarded as a convict. Governor Tulbagh agreed to the recommendation that Thuart should receive 30 rix-dollars as remuneration.

Thuart was also appointed as a member of the expedition that sailed to Mozambique with the ship Schuijlenburg. The expedition was tasked with recovering the money and other precious goods belonging to the ship Breedenhoff that had stranded some time earlier in Delagoa Bay. At the Council meeting of 10 February 1756 (C. 134) it was minuted that according to the journalsof Captain Hans Harmensz. and “commies” Dirk Westerhof the search had been in vain.

### **3.4.5 Aftermath**

Unfortunately Thuart’s good service did not earn him his freedom. After some time all but Manuel had forgotten about the Governor’s concession. In 1761, while Tulbagh was still Governor, he is still listed as one of the convicts living in the slave lodge (CJ3189). He was also listed in 1778 (CJ3189), in 1780 as “Manie Douart” (CJ2568), in 1781 as “Manuel Douart, duijker” and in 1782 as “Manuel”. In 1783 it was noted that he had died since the previous list was compiled. In the Slave Lodge register it was noted that the “kloeke bandiete jonge Manuel Doual” died on 9 Augustus 1782 (C.2628, folio 14).

## **4. REFUGEES FROM EUROPE**

### **4.1 Introductory notes**

The revocation of the Edict of Nantes by the Catholic king of France in 1685 not only had serious consequences for France and its neighbouring countries, but also influenced the composition of the population at the Cape. For many years before and also after the revocation, the Protestants (Huguenots) in France not only lost their freedom of faith but were also persecuted and murdered.

At least 250 000 French Huguenots fled to countries such as the Netherland, Flanders, Switzerland, Germany, England, America, the Netherlands, Poland and the Cape of Good Hope, where they could enjoy religious freedom. Just as many were killed in France itself. Between 1618 and 1725 between 5 000 and 7 000 Huguenots reached the shores of America.

#### 4.2 Huguenots at the Cape

The main-stream organised emigration of Huguenots to the Cape occurred in 1688 and 1689 during the governance of Simon van der Stel. However, even before this large scale emigration, individual Huguenots such as François Villion (1671) and the brothers François and Guillaume du Toit (1686) fled to the Cape. In 1692 a total of 201 French Huguenots had settled at the Cape of Good Hope, most of them in what is known as *Franschhoek* (“French Corner” (15.6.1717, C. 42), some 70 km outside the Cape settlement. Many farms still bear their original French names. Through marriage and intermarriage with the Dutch and German inhabitants they merged into the community.



12. Cape Huguenots and their places of origin Europe



Some of the Huguenots who settled at the Cape were well educated for their time, and practised important professions. The following are only a few of them:

*Josue Cellier* (Cilliers, Cillié) was a farmer, wine maker and carpenter  
*Daniel Nortier* and *Jacques Pinard* were carpenters  
*Daniël Hugot* and *André Gaucher* (Gouws) were ironsmiths  
*Francois Villion & Estienne Bruère* (Bruwer) were wagon makers  
*Paul Roux* was a teacher  
*Jean Durand, Paul le Fébre* and *Jean Prieur du Plessis* were medical practitioners.

A century later the promulgation of the *Edict of Toleration* on 28 November 1787 partially restored the civil and religious rights of the Huguenots in France.

### 4.3 CASE STUDY OF JEAN PRIEUR DU PLESSIS

#### 4.3.1 Life at the Cape as “chirurgijn”

Jean-Prieur du Plessis, born at Poitiers in 1638, was already fifty years old when he arrived at the Cape on board the *Oosterlandt*, on 26 April 1688. He was married to Marie Madeleine Menanteau, also from Poitiers. Their first child, Charles, was born on board ship and baptised there while the *Oosterland* was still at anchor in Table Bay. The second child, Jean-Louis, was born in 1691. Du Plessis practised as a “chirurgijn” (a surgeon) on board, and was also a farmer.

A year after the family’s arrival at the Cape an incident occurred during which one of his countrymen, Charles Marais, was injured and later died of complications caused by the wound.

The reason for Marais’ death was the following: He was attacked by some Khoi, one named as Dikkop or Elissa, when he refused their request to pick some watermelons growing on his piece of land, because according to the victom the fruit was not ripe yet. First Dikkop threw a watermelon at him and then hit him on the right thigh with a stone. The wound which became infected caused Marais’ death.

The Council of Policy requested Du Plessis to investigate the event and conduct a post-mortem on the victim. He also had to submit an official report on the untimely death of Charles Marais. Du Plessis in person compiled the document in French and signed it, directly followed by a Dutch translation by Jacques de Savoye, another Huguenot who was in good command of Dutch.

*“Le -4-eme davril 1689*

*Jay estes a draeset [Drakenstein] fere visite deude feun charles maret [Charles Marais] de deux coup de pierre quil areseut dant laine senestre dons jant est fait ouverture pardevant monsieur Landros Jean moustar [Jan Mostert] et derick Cochés [Dirk Coetzee], Jaques de Savoie bourmestre de Talanbose [Stellenbosch] et drasent [Drakenstein].*

*Lequel jes trouves une grande contusion quis contenoiet osis par dedant. Jay treuves beaucoup de sant celles quil lui estois surmonté aux coeur Ce que je guge quil Lui ait choses*





## 5. CONCLUSION

It was possible to construct the case studies for this presentation by using the information gathered mainly from the various disseminated VOC series as mentioned earlier. What was most revealing, however, is that all the cases could be enriched by considering not only the circumstances under which and reasons why these individuals arrived at the Cape, but also by observing their different religious beliefs and what role these viewpoints probably played.

Although Angela van Bengalen was probably raised as a Hindu, it was quite possible that she had knowledge of the Christian belief system, the reason being that the teachings of St. Thomas had then already been known in India for more than 1700 years. It was also the faith held by the various Western powers that had all of a sudden arrived on India's doorstep. When she had to choose between her freedom as a converted Christian or probably remaining a Hindu slave, she seamlessly made the transition and could become an acknowledged member of the Cape society.

The two Muslim royals, Princes Loring Passir and Dipa Nagara, were both exiled to the Cape for political, not religious reasons. The fact that they were not sent to Robben Island, was proof that they were not regarded as a threat to social stability at the Cape. For that reason they were allowed to stay in Stellenbosch and could mingle freely with the local community by attending auctions, travelling to and from the Cabo settlement etc. They could also practice their religion without any restriction, and their needs were attended to, for instance to supply them with fresh running water from the Eerste Rivier at all times, as required by their nation.

The fact that both Nicolas Ondaatje and Manuel Thuart were St. Thomas Christians could be the reason why they were treated with more leniency by the VOC. Ondaatje was described as a free black in the documents and could move freely around in the Cape colony as a teacher in the various districts. He was well-educated, respected and regarded as an equal, not as a convict. Manuel Thuart was treated somewhat differently and although he enjoyed some freedom by being officially recognised as a diver in VOC service, he had to remain in the Slave Lodge. Even if it was only for a while, he unexpectedly gained the favour of Governor Tulbagh by rendering a service that no European could perform. The fact that he was a St. Thomas Christian could have contributed to the more cordial treatment he received.

The French refugee, Jean Prieur du Plessis, was the only European case to be observed. Tragically, he and his fellow believers were persecuted by the Catholic church for their reformed views, in spite of the fact that members of the two groups very often shared the same lineage and heritage. For example, Du Plessis' cousin was Cardinal de Richelieu, known for his relentless persecution of the Protestants. Du Plessis had no criminal record, was no enemy of the state, but an ally with much needed skills. That is not to say that he always supported all the VOC views. Eventually the French merged well with the Cape community through marriage and intermarriage. Knowing the terrible consequences of being persecuted, it seems as if most of them tended to show mercy to people in general, of which their slaves and the poor were examples noted in the documents.

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<sup>7</sup> Western Cape Archives and Records Service

<sup>8</sup> Verbatim Copies of VOC Journals copied in the 1880's in the Rijksarchief, The Hague, then brought back to SA and are vested in the WCARS