

‘Language is an essential tool of colonial domination.’ Discuss this statement in relation to a particular colonial and cultural context of your choosing.

In the case of Sri Lanka’s colonisation by the Portuguese, spanning from 1505 until 1658, language was an essential tool in asserting colonial domination and in preserving Portuguese influence in the centuries to come. The relinquishment of colonies by their empires in the 20th century was inevitable (as Sri Lankans enjoyed on February 4th, 1948), but the ability of the Portuguese colonists to exert a long-lasting linguistic influence on Sri Lanka is evidence of successful colonial domination, achieved largely through the implementation of the Portuguese language on the native people and their daily lives throughout their rule. In 1505, a strong Portuguese naval force arrived on the shores of Colombo, commanded by a celebrated sea captain, Lourenço de Almeida, acting under his father - Sir Francisco de Almeida, the first viceroy of Portuguese-India. Lourenço de Almeida founded a settlement in Colombo that same year, kickstarting what would be a lengthy Portuguese rule on the island. The Portuguese consolidated their settlements and colonies by utilising their language in all aspects of greater colonial domination, including in the role of Roman Catholic missionaries, in the role of the *Casados* and in the establishing of Portuguese as the language of the nobility. In the long period after the Portuguese colonists left Sri Lanka, Portuguese remained omnipresent in the country, particularly in a colloquialised variation of it (coined as Ceylon-Portuguese by many historians). This *lingua franca* (a common language adopted between people who speak different native languages) was central in the colonial domination of Sri Lanka by the Portuguese, who effectively weaponised language as a tool for this objective. From the mid-seventeenth century onwards, the Dutch and the British both successfully colonised Sri Lanka, however, the strength of the Portuguese language hindered their influence, so they overall did not have the same extensive cultural impact as their predecessor did.

The main way in which language was utilised as a tool by the Portuguese settlers in their quest for long-term colonial domination was by associating their language heavily with the Roman Catholic Church and its missionaries. For example, by preaching and conducting church services in Portuguese. By 1658, the end of the Portuguese rule in Sri Lanka, there were 123 priests across the island – only a minority of them had managed to grasp the local languages of Tamil and Sinhala. A lack of books and dictionaries to learn from can be blamed for this,

but it was apparent that most priests had no desire to learn these local languages and were intent on preaching Catholicism in Portuguese. The priests did still however, make obvious efforts to teach Portuguese to locals: for instance, by providing interpreters to facilitate church activities, allowing them to continue in the Portuguese language. Consequently, the missionaries were able to bridge the language divide between settlers and local people, bringing them together through their love for Roman Catholicism. The efforts of Portuguese missionaries were so influential that their presence was recognised well-into the Dutch period of rule in Ceylon, as noted by a British voyager, Robert Knox in 1681 – “many of the natives became Christians and learnt the Portuguese tongue”. By tactically using religion as a gateway for locals to pick up the Portuguese language, the settlers were able to assert colonial domination for an elongated period, as religion was passed from generation to generation of islanders. During this historical period, religion was a crucial aspect of a country’s national identity – therefore, by forming a strong relationship between Catholicism and the Portuguese tongue, Portuguese settlers had successfully utilised language as a tool for colonial domination because the language’s use was drawn out into the period of Dutch rule in Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, it can be argued that future colonists were able to disassociate Sri Lankans from the Portuguese language, by diminishing the presence of the Roman Catholic Church. The Dutch were infamously Protestant, and the beginning of their rule in Sri Lanka saw aggressive initiatives to erase any signs of Portuguese presence on the island, going to the extents of declaring Roman Catholicism illegal and banning priests from the island. For instance, on 31st October 1658, a *plakkaat* (translating to ‘placard’ in English from Dutch) was issued by the Commander of Jaffna, Anthony Pavilioen, declaring that “Portuguese will no longer be used as a language for preaching in”. However, while authorities made vigorous attempts to root out the memory of previous colonists, their successes were fleeting because they were insignificant compared to the strength that the language demonstrated as a pillar of Sri Lankan society. The Dutch succumbed to the Portuguese language after nearly two decades of attempting to erase its presence, which proves that the Portuguese settlers had successfully established Portuguese as the ecclesiastical language of Sri Lanka for an extensive period. Evidence that the Dutch were unable to successfully oppose the Portuguese language includes copies of the New Testament in Portuguese that were distributed by the Dutch East

India Company in Sri Lanka during the Dutch period. Therefore, missionaries were utilised as agents of the Portuguese language to assert colonial domination in the long-term, by ingraining it into the national identity of Sri Lanka as a facet of Roman Catholicism.

Secondly, the Portuguese language was established among villages through the role of the *Casados* – an alternative way for the Portuguese to achieve colonial domination, using language as their main tool. The *Casados* were a product of Viceroy Alfonso de Albuquerque's policy to promote miscegenation (the intermarrying between races), with the overall aim of ensuring the Portuguese legacy lived on through future generations. The married settlers, known as the '*Casados*' (literally, 'married people') popularised the Portuguese language in villages, by marrying local women and speaking Portuguese whilst they stayed in the neighbourhood. This was partially done to encourage native people to adopt the Portuguese language, but also as a show of power: settlers were reluctant to 'stoop down' and learn the languages of the natives. Albuquerque's vision was that offspring would be loyal to the Portuguese crown and establishment, therefore allowing the Portuguese to have a protracted cultural influence on the island's communities. In fact, the long-term effect of this policy could be seen by the 1960s, when Sri Lankan authorities stated that the entire low country population of Sri Lanka was ethnically Eurasian. Additionally, the language's rise in prominence can be supported by the emergence of Ceylon-Portuguese dictionaries published in the 19th century, during the British rule of Sri Lanka. This is a testament to the long-term impact that the *Casados* had on the island, because evidently, future settlers were unable to ignore the language's strong presence and so had to learn the language themselves. Therefore, the *Casados* were successful in implementing Portuguese as the new local language because Ceylon-Portuguese continued to be learnt and used centuries later.

On the contrary, it can be argued that the *Casados* did not effectively pass on the Portuguese language which weakened colonial domination. For instance, there are clear inconsistencies in the grammar and vocabulary of Ceylon-Portuguese, but also in the proficiency in which it was spoken by locals. Linguists have noted that in general, *lingua francae*, such as Ceylon-Portuguese, often have a limited vocabulary and basic syntax because they were developed only out of necessity. In this case, Ceylon-Portuguese was developed through marriage negotiations and community relations. Moreover, future Portuguese descendants spoke an even more colloquialised variation of Portuguese, which had become more alike to Tamil and

Sinhala over time (the mother tongues of Sri Lanka). This can be attributed to the mental attitudes of the offspring of mixed marriages – second and third generations of the *Casados* were often estranged from their Portuguese roots and so were more culturally inclined towards Sri Lankan customs, leading to the loss of traditional Portuguese. However, the work of the *Casados* prevailed in the acceptance of Ceylon-Portuguese by not only locals but also, future British settlers who made obvious efforts to adapt to this *lingua franca* (seen in the publication of Ceylon-Portuguese dictionaries). Therefore, the *Casados* were crucial in promoting the Portuguese language throughout Sri Lanka because they introduced Portuguese at a local level which allowed the language to expand and evolve into Ceylon-Portuguese over an elongated period.

Finally, the Portuguese colonists achieved colonial domination through associating the Portuguese language with nobility and high rank - for example, in the form of Portuguese surnames. During the Portuguese rule, to hold authoritative positions in the administrations, natives were strongly encouraged to take Portuguese surnames. This is noted by the historian, Hugh Tinker, in his book, 'South Asia: A Short History' (1966): "*all Sinhalese who were awarded positions of rank and responsibility [...] adopted Portuguese surnames*". The most common surnames included Fernando, Pieris, Mendis and de Almeida. The surname 'de Almeida' is of great significance, as it became associated with Lourenço de Almeida, the Portuguese sea captain celebrated for first 'discovering' Sri Lanka. The native Sri Lankan people were eager to personally associate themselves with the Portuguese language, linking it to prosperity and success – it was not enough for them to just speak the language, they wanted to rebrand themselves with it too. Portuguese was painted by colonists as a language of the most sophisticated people, which led to masses of natives proudly adopting Portuguese surnames. The Portuguese, therefore, effectively forced their language's popularisation by equating it to affluence which led to masses of locals taking Portuguese surnames. The effect of this can be seen extensively in the centuries that followed since most Sri Lankan families retained their Portuguese surnames even after the Portuguese forces departed the island.

Conversely, it can also be argued that despite the Portuguese language prevailing into even the British rule of Sri Lanka, it was no longer recognised as the sophisticated language it once was. This opinion is noted by several British voyagers in their books written after the Portuguese left Sri Lanka, but particularly, by Robert Percival in his book, 'An Account of the

Island of Ceylon' (1803). Published in 1803, only 7 years after British forces conquered Sri Lanka, Percival's account provides a first-hand insight into the colonial and cultural landscape of the time. It can be expected that at the time the source was written, Sri Lanka was culturally divided, having been recently invaded by European forces for the third time. As he was a British voyager, we can infer that Percival wrote this book to inform those in Britain of the new addition to the British Empire – for this reason, it is possible that a sense of superiority over and prejudice towards the natives is conveyed in Percival's writing. Percival writes, "*The language spoken most universally [...] is the Portuguese of India, a base, corrupt dialect, altogether different from that spoken in Portugal*". By referring to this *lingua franca* as the "Portuguese of India", it can be inferred that by the 19th century, the Portuguese language had become so colloquialised that it was unrecognisable as traditional Portuguese. Moreover, Percival describes the language as a "corrupt dialect" which implies that he felt the language had been tampered with, becoming an insult to traditional Portuguese – he even notes that the two dialects are "altogether different". However, in the same paragraph, Percival expresses that hearing Dutch women in Colombo (Sri Lanka's executive and judicial capital whilst under British rule) speaking Portuguese "surprised me a good deal". Evidently, the linguistic culture of 19th century Sri Lanka subverted British expectations – it shocked them that people with no relation to the former Portuguese establishment spoke the Portuguese language so openly, as if it were their own, especially since it had been almost 300 years since the Portuguese arrived on Colombo's shores. Therefore, even though by the British rule, Portuguese was no longer renowned in Sri Lanka for its sophistication, its undeniable presence centuries later is evidence of successful long-term colonial domination.

In conclusion, language was a highly effective tool for colonial domination, which Portuguese forces used to their advantage in several different aspects of the colonisation of Sri Lanka and its society in the 16th and 17th centuries. The colonists ingrained their language in the Church, villages, and nobility, which allowed the language to be preserved as an integral part of the island's society. This is evidence of successful colonial domination because, despite Sri Lanka later being colonised by both the Dutch and British forces, the Portuguese presence persevered mainly through the significance of its language. In the long-term, the association of the Portuguese language with the Roman Catholic Church and religion was the most effective use of language. This view can be supported by the failure by the Dutch forces to

erase the memory of the Portuguese from the church – the Dutch quickly succumbed to the Portuguese language, evident from their ordering of the Dutch East India Company to distribute copies of the New Testament in Portuguese across Sri Lanka during their rule. Although the *Casados* and the upper classes of Sri Lankans acted as agents of the Portuguese language during the 16th and 17th centuries, they were not the most effective use of this tool. This is because their efforts were hampered by the emergence of Ceylon-Portuguese, which only became more and more colloquial as the centuries passed – finally, becoming almost unrecognisable as a stem of the Portuguese language. Despite this, the influence of the language was extensive and visible in Sri Lanka even until, and during, the 19th century (for example, in the form of Portuguese surnames held by many Sri Lankan families), which shows successful colonial domination because the Portuguese language resisted countless attempts to be rooted out. Ultimately, Portuguese colonial forces utilised language as a tool of colonial domination in Sri Lanka during both its rule from 1505-1658, but also into the subsequent rules of the Dutch forces and the British Empire.

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