

THE HEADMAN SYSTEM IN THE NUWERAKALAWIYA DISTRICT OF SRI LANKA 1815 - 1873¹

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Several scholars researching into the modern period of Sri Lankan history have focused attention on the importance of the Headman system under the colonial administration. The Portuguese, the Dutch as well as the British found that they could not do away with the system totally for several reasons. First, they could not provide administrative structures that would cover the whole range of activities and the Headman system provided a convenient lower strata. Second, in countries with large indigenous populations and long standing cultures, colonialism needed collaborators in order to ensure stability. The Headman generally forming the nobility of the country fitted into this role and provided the essential link with the people. However, all three colonial powers made changes in the system to suit their particular interests. Hitherto the Headman system had been treated as a uniform structure without paying due regard to regional variations. But there were differences between the systems operating in the Tamil and the Sinhalese areas, and between those of the Maritime and the Kandyan provinces. Further, there were even features peculiar to particular geographical areas. Nuwerakalawiya was one such area and in this paper an attempt will be made to examine this native administrative system which existed when Nuwerakalawiya Disāvani, later known as the Nuwerakalawiya district, fell into the hands of the British in 1815 and to show how this system was utilized by the British administrators during the 19th century till the creation of the North Central Province in 1873. The Headman system according to the Headmen's Commission was "based on that principle of personal government which has hitherto proved most successful in oriental countries. It depends on close and friendly relations between the headmen and the villagers to whom the abstract idea of "Government" means nothing. They have always been accustomed by traditions and temperament to seek and obey the orders of a personal representative of a personal sovereign, and have in return expected and received the personal care and protection of accessible and paternal rulers."²

1. This paper is extracted from a doctoral thesis accepted by the University of Kelaniya (1977) on "Nuwerakalawiya and the North Central Province under British administration, 1833-1900"

2. Sessional Papers No.2 of 1922. *Headmen's Commission Report* p. 5