This chapter explores the signs of a cosmopolitan court culture that flourished in the kingdom of Kandy, and in particular at the royal court of its capital Senkadagala, from the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries. The Kandyan kingdom resulted from a secession led by Sēnasammata Vikramabāhu (r. 1469–1511), the ‘founder ruler’ of the kande uḍa pas raṭa (‘the five regions of the hill country’) from the realm of Köṭṭe. For much of the sixteenth century, Kandy stood in a field of tension between Köṭṭe, Sitāvaka and the Portuguese, taking part in numerous alliances and often unpredictable diplomatic games. Catholicism was brought into the kingdom by its rulers as part of their strategy to gain full independence from the lowland kings. Under Jayavīra Banḍāra (r. 1511–52) Catholic friars appeared at court and some conversions took place. Karalliyadde Banḍāra (r. 1552–82) publicly embraced Catholicism, but ended up fleeing the kingdom with, among others, his infant daughter Kusumāsana Devi in his retinue. The princess was soon baptized by the Portuguese and called Dona Catarina. After a period of great political turmoil involving a Portuguese-supported military campaign in the Kandyan highlands, Dona Catarina was captured by the forces of Vimaladharmasūriya I (r. 1590–1604) in 1594 and the king espoused her as his chief queen. Vimaladharmasūriya, originally known as Konappu Banḍāra, was the son of a distinguished aristocrat from the province known as hatara kōrale (‘four districts’, roughly equivalent to today’s Kegalla District) who was cruelly murdered by Rājasimha I of Sitāvaka. Consequently Konappu had to flee to Portuguese Goa where he became a Catholic convert as Dom João de Áustria. Such conversions were quite common in the Köṭṭe kingdom and also among the rulers of Kandy prior to Vimaladharmasūriya. Consequently there is no way in which one could in hindsight decide their ‘sincerity’. Vimaladharna means ‘of the pure doctrine’, apparently a name bestowed on him by monks possibly unsure of his previous antecedents while sūriya refers to the ‘dynasty of the Sun’.
A profound yet creative contradiction was at the heart of Vimaladharmasūriya’s reign as the first consecrated king of Kandy. As a Buddhist ruler resisting Portuguese attacks, and also attempting to cement his position against the traditionally unruly elite of Kandy, Vimaladharmasūriya sought the recovery of the Tooth Relic and, to house it, had a ‘two-storeyed, superb relic temple [i.e. relic house] erected on an exquisitely beautiful piece of ground in the neighborhood of the royal palace’.

4 Following the example of previous kings, he publicly demonstrated his faith by going on pilgrimage to Śri Pāda, the holy footprint of the Buddha. He also sent a delegation to Rakkhanga (Arakan in Burma) to bring monks to Sri Lanka to revitalize Buddhism, owing to a lapse in the higher ordination (upasampadā). When they arrived within the sīma or ordination boundary, the king himself ‘led the bhikkhus [and] had the ceremony of admission to the Order performed in this Great bhikkhu [monk] community on many of the sons of good family and thus protected the Order of the Enlightened One’.

However, quite unlike what later historians have come to see as Lankan patriotism, Vimaladharmasūriya’s reign was also culturally and politically very complex. Kandyan society in the early seventeenth century reflects a modernity that was not permitted to fully develop in later times. Dona Catarina herself, although usually listed by Sri Lankan historians as Kusumāsana Devi, never gave up her Catholic faith when serving as queen consort. According to an early Dutch source, she ‘visit[ed] no pagodas’ at all, a potential sign of Catholic intransigence, while her prolonged presence at the heart of the Kandyan court certainly alerts us to the complexity of the situation.

6 From a Buddhist perspective, Catholicism could be treated as an addition to the existing religious landscape. The openness in principle and in practice of many Buddhists to the adoption of new religious faiths is well-known. As Kitsiri Malagoda pointed out in respect of conversions in the early British period, one could become a Christian nominally but remain at heart a Buddhist.

7 Jesus can be easily absorbed into Lankan culture as Viṣṇu, Saman or any other of the adopted Hindu gods; and the Virgin Mary easily became one of the many mother goddesses adored by Lankans, often identified by Sinhala Catholics with the goddess Pattini. The missionaries were aware of these overlaps and, while hoping that in the next generation or two the descendants of the first converts would become ‘genuine’ Christians, they also learned to live with such dilemmas on the ground, especially where they lacked military backing by the empire. The very word used to designate what we now call ‘conversion’ – kulavādī – is polysemic. It certainly refers to the act of being baptized, but implies more generally the joining of a new group, caste or faith.

Differences in religion aside, Dona Catarina and Vimaladharmasūriya were familiar with Portuguese customs, to which they had both been exposed during their time away from Kandy. And yet Vimaladharmasūriya’s openness to Western ways of living is something that we would hardly know of if we had to rely exclusively on Pāli and Sinhala sources. It is the Dutch accounts of the time that offer the most remarkably cosmopolitan panorama of Kandy. According to Phillippus Baldeaus, the Lankan king ‘ridiculed the idea of all religious tenets,
permitting everyone a free exercise of it according to their own will and pleasure'.

The Dutch envoy Sebald de Weert famously mentions how he saw the king holding ‘a gold cup full of wine made from the grapes that grow in his house’. The Spilbergen embassy of 1602 on visiting the court recorded the presence of ‘many Spanish chairs [and] a table on which all was arranged in the Christian manner’. It further noted that Vimaladharmasūriya had ‘all new buildings constructed according to the Christian style’. The king himself took some of the Dutchmen into his courtly service and ‘even began to learn to play several instruments’. Spilbergen was brought into the ‘chamber of the Queen where she sat with her children, the Prince and the Princess, who were all dressed in the Christian manner’. This of course was in part to please the guests, but it is likely to reflect broader changes in the material and visual culture of the Kandyan court. As Paul E. Pieris summed it up, ‘for a century Portuguese ideas molded the fashions of the Court at Senkaḍagala’. In fact, the preference for certain elements of Western fashions remained evident under Nārēndrasinha, the last of the patrilineal line of Vimaladharmasūriya I, who ‘used to wear white wigs […] with the necessary powder and pomade the Dutch sent him’.

In contrast with some of the later Nāyaka rulers, Vimaladharmasūriya cultivated a remarkably open attitude towards foreign envoys at court. Distinguished guests were permitted into the inner chamber of the palace to meet the royal family. Of course ambassadors had to pay homage to the king, but not in the abject ceremonial style that the British and Dutch ambassadors had to endure especially during and after the reign of the great Nāyaka king Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha in the mid-eighteenth century. As the Dutchman Sebald De Weert noted, he greeted Vimaladharmasūriya ‘in the manner of our country, with one knee on the ground’, and was then permitted to see his children. There is a beautiful picture of the king shaking hands in Western style with Spilbergen. And De Weert, the next Dutch envoy says that when the king was with some of his counsellors he tried to kiss the king’s hand as a token of honour but the king ‘took me in his arms and squeezed me heartily, so that he made my ribs crack’. One of his reputed actions surely anticipates our own time when he informed De Weert ‘that he was prepared to send his own son, when of suitable age, to Europe, to be trained under Prince Mauritz [Prince of Orange]’. According to Phillippus Baldaeus, the king was ‘in every sense of the word a finished courtier’.

When the Spilbergen account places emphasis on the fashionable outfits of the men and women of Kandy, this naturally refers to the elite of the capital in the first place, rather than the general population as it was described by the English captive Robert Knox. Even so, village women dressed in style when visiting family and friends. Wine and foreign foods may have been served at court, but ordinary people, like all Sinhalas of the time, were ‘not allowed to eat bull’s or cow’s or buffalo meat nor can they drink any wine’. What we do not know is whether court culture had an influence in other important cities, especially Bintānna-Alutnuvara, the alternative residence of the Kandyan kings, and the location of the great pilgrimage centre at Mahiyangana.
house and dress fashions were certainly at a premium, following not only Western but also other Asian models. Much of this had to do with the growth of international trade, which was in the hands of South Indian Muslim merchants beginning to establish communities in the Kandyan area. This in turn had linguistic consequences, because no trade or businesses could be conducted without the knowledge of Tamil and, to some extent, Portuguese – two widely diffused _linguae francae_ across much of South and Southeast Asia. Even those who did not wear expensive foreign clothes would thus have come into contact with the wider flow of cultural goods.

The Kandyan policy of toleration and cultural cosmopolitanism was fraught, tense, and perhaps even paradoxical for a kingdom struggling so fiercely against the Portuguese. It was nevertheless a thriving reality and continued by Senarat (r. 1604–35). This former Buddhist monk in fact married the widowed Dona Catarina. Both he and his son Rājasiṃha II (r. 1635–87), in spite of their political hostility to the Portuguese, continued a policy of religious toleration. Senarat gave shelter to about 4,000 Muslims expelled from various parts of the coastal lowlands by the Portuguese, allowing them to settle on the East Coast. His successor, in turn, took in Catholic refugees persecuted in the lowlands by the Dutch.

It should be remembered that, under the influence of his mother, Rājasiṃha II was educated in his early childhood by Christian friars. He ‘could read, write and speak Portuguese fluently, and was familiar with the manners and customs of many European peoples’. It seems that a clear distinction must be made again, in this specific context, between Catholic friars serving as the king’s teachers and the Portuguese colonials fighting Kandy from the lowlands. Unlike in the Portuguese territories, friars in Kandy began to recognize that the dominant religion was Buddhism and that, beyond the boundaries of the _Estado da Índia_ – the Portuguese Empire in the East – they lacked political clout. Further, we must remember that the Catholic Church was not in practice a unitary organization. While some priests carried the full set of colonial prejudices, others could act more diplomatically even without abandoning in principle an exclusivist notion of religion. It is thus logical that, while Vimaladharasāriya I, Senerat and Rājasiṃha II were unrelenting in their hatred of Portuguese rule, this attitude did not necessarily extend to Catholicism as such; that is, to Catholicism as an intellectually provocative religious culture introduced by educated priests.

It is, again, the European sources that give us the most vivid depictions of religious and ethnic diversity in mid- to late seventeenth-century Kandy. Spilbergen says that, ‘among these Singales there live many Moors, Turks and other heathens, who all have special laws. Brahmos [Brahmins] are there in large numbers, who are very superstitious and respected by the other nations’. Numerous Hindu ascetic wanderers such as āṇḍis and _pantārams_ carried their own brands of faith throughout the country. Spilbergen mentions how he ‘was received [in] the city of Candy by some thousand armed soldiers of all nationalities, such as Turcken (Turks), Mooren (Moors), Singales, Cafferos (Kaffirs) and renegade Portuguese’.
Knox tells us that many Englishmen captured during the reign of Rājasimha II were kept as ‘prisoners’ in the villages close to the city, naturally failing to mention that they, like a number of Frenchmen and perhaps some Danes, enjoyed substantial liberties. 32 Rājasimha II was especially keen to have foreigners in his kingdom for a variety of reasons: as servants, as interpreters, craftsmen, soldiers, mechanics and gunners. He also seems to have appreciated – like many other Asian rulers – the variety of humanity in his domain, just as he loved to have a good stable and many animals and birds in his menagerie. 33 As H. W. Codrington nicely put it, ‘luckless Europeans as fell into his hands [were treated] as curiosities, much in the same way as the lion and other animals sent him by the Dutch’. 34

After Rājasimha II, there are some signs of a regime shift under his son Vimaladharmasūriya II (r. 1687–1707) and his grandson Narēndrasinha (r. 1707–39), but no straightforward rupture. The developments are best understood against the backdrop of Dutch conquest in the lowlands formerly held by the Portuguese, including almost all of the island’s ports (the last Portuguese ports to fall were Colombo in 1656, and Jaffna and Mannar in 1658). The Dutch might have been religious liberals in Holland, but not in Sri Lanka. 35 Here, the Dutch conquest suffocated Catholicism in the low country, generating a remarkable clandestine revival under Father Joseph Vaz, a Catholic Brahmin from Goa, and his Oratorian mission. 36 Kandyan attitudes towards Catholicism after Vimaladharmasūriya II cannot be understood without taking into account this key development, including the enormously successful apostolic mission of Vaz. Father Vaz’s missionary outreach embraced a vast area, and there is little doubt that today’s Catholic population in the Kandyan kingdom and much of the low country owe considerably to the toleration of this apostolic work by the Kandyan kings. 37 Vimaladharmasūriya II apparently ignored the treaty of 1638 between the Dutch and his father Rājasimha II that stated that the monarch ‘should not allow Roman Catholic monks and priests and other ecclesiastics to domicile themselves in his dominions’. 38 When one of the missionaries died, Vimaladharmasūriya II permitted him to be buried in Christian style in the church in Kandy, within the city limits itself, an action that certainly upset the Dutch and might have been considered outrageous in later Nāyaka times. But it is also telling that, along with his support of Catholicism and the many Indian ascetic sects, Vimaladharmasūriya II remained concerned with the welfare of the sāsana or the Buddhist dispensation and civilizational order. A splendid account of his Buddhist activities is found in chapter 97 of the Cūḷavamsa, the overall content of which is confirmed by a Catholic report from 1701. 39

More than Vimaladharmasūriya, it has been his son Narēndrasinha who has received a particularly bad press regarding his Buddhist credentials. Lorna Dewaraja, for example, has it that there was public discontent about this ruler’s ‘inadequate support of Buddhism’. The distinguished historian adds that although he did ‘at times show a superficial interest in Buddhist art and literature […] no whole-hearted attempt was made to resuscitate the most vital organization, the Sangha’. 40 The historiographical problem at stake is,
however, not so much the connection of discontent with a lack of Buddhist patronage. The main issue is how resentment against the king is naturally assumed to have been ‘caused’ by the latter’s ‘partiality’ for Catholics and the alien Nāyakas. The fact of the matter is that resentment against kings by rival factions at court is hardly exceptional. I would say that tolerance for another religion ought to be considered a compliment to Narāṇḍrasinuha as an expression of his Buddhist and cosmopolitan values that commenced with the reign of Vimaladharmaśāriya I.

As so many other Lankan rulers did, Narāṇḍrasinuha supported the presence of various religions in his realm. He does indeed seem to have known Father Joseph Vaz since childhood and regarded him with some veneration. Yet like other Kandyan kings he was highly educated and must have had regular conversations with the sāmaneras he housed in his palace premises, as well as with his teachers who were educated, albeit not fully ordained monks. As a monarch he could hardly have avoided consulting his Brahmin purōhitas (counsellors) at court. However, it is time to move beyond such categories as ‘patriotic’ versus ‘unpatriotic’, or ‘Buddhist’ versus ‘non-Buddhist’ in such complex settings. Let us revive, for the sake of a nuanced picture, Narāṇḍrasinuha’s Buddhist persona as expressed in the Cūḷavamsa. If this monarch was a crypto-Catholic, he would hardly have provided accommodation to Buddhist novices in his palace premises in Kunḍasāle and performed so many other acts of Buddhist merit-making. He continued the grand tradition of giving alms to monks and had religious texts copied for their benefit. ‘His heart was grieved’ when he noted that the Palace of the Tooth Relic his father had erected in the capital had fallen into disrepair, and set about rebuilding it into a beautiful two-storey structure ‘resplendent with all kinds of brilliant ornaments’. Narāṇḍrasinuha’s artistic patronage included support for a graceful roof and the depiction of thirty-two jatakas, actually listed in the Cūḷavamsa. Earlier in his reign we are told that he went to Mahiyangana-Bīntāнная (i.e., Alutnuvara), where his grandfather Rājasimha was born, and offered several pūjas. Mahiyangana was one of the great pilgrimage centres and palace complexes and according to Buddhist myth it was here that the Buddha banished the demons and cleared a space for Buddhism. It was such an important place that Narāṇḍrasinuha went twice again to Mahiyangana at the head of a great army (or following) where he ‘celebrated a great sacrificial festival’. He went on pilgrimage to Śrī Pada and also once to Anurādhapura. He supported Viṣṇu by endowing the god’s shrine in Kandy with extensive maintenance villages, just as he might have supported Christ as a kind of Viṣṇu. He constructed a rampart or wall to enclose the Bōdhī tree, the Buddhist temples and the shrine for the god Nātha, the future Buddha Maitreya in the city. According to Codrington, the king also built the Mahā Dēvāle for Viṣṇu in Kandy in 1731 but if this author is right, this might mean that either he did extensive reconstruction of the already existent Viṣṇu shrine or that the present Mahā Dēvāle is the work of his later years.
Religious patronage in Kandy was not a matter of either supporting Buddhism or going against it. Rather, it involved a skilful combination of patronage extended to many different currents of thought and groups, as indeed was the case at many other South Asian courts. To understand this complexity, it is crucial that we further observe the connection with the Nāyakas of Madurai and its impact on Kandyan kingship. In her important chapter on the Nāyakkar dynasty and its origin, Dewaraja sums up what many historians think:

Śri Vīra Pārakrama Narendrasimha, known to his subjects as Kunḍasāle deyyo, the last of the royal Sinhalese line of Sēnasammata Vikramabāhu, died in the year 1739. His brother-in-law who hailed from the outskirts of Madura in South India ascended the throne of Kandy as Śri Vijaya Rājasimha (1739–1747). He and the three kings who ruled after him until 1815, constitute the Nāyakkar dynasty, so called because of their association with the Nāyaks of Madura. In Kandy they were aliens, not only in race but in language, religion and culture as well.

Sri Lankan historians often assume that the presence of the Nāyaka dynasty resulted in the ‘Dravidianization’ of Sri Lankan Buddhist culture. This is Dewaraja’s position, too, although she recognizes that the Cūḷavamsa unreservedly praises the Nāyaka kings. As Dewaraja further admits, there were only a few rebellions, and ‘we also have the unanimous verdict of all our sources that all the Nāyakkar rulers except the last were popular with their subjects’. But if the Nāyakas were ‘aliens’ in respect of race, language, religion and culture, why their remarkable popularity? To deal with this issue we must move away from observing the Nāyaka kings as simple foreigners, to exploring the impact of the Nāyakas on Kandyan society against the background of what we have observed already.

Long before Nāyaka rule began in Sri Lanka, the Kandyan kings had political and marital relations with the Nāyakas. Evidence in this regard is abundant for the reigns of Rājasimha II, his son Vimaladharmasūriya II and his grandson Narēndrasinha. Military cooperation may have been an early trigger, although a longer tradition of Lankan rulers seeking support in the Madurai-Tanjore region against Kōṭṭe and the Portuguese has been pointed out. Dewaraja notes that ‘no less than a thousand men from Madura fought for Rājasimha [the second of that name] in the victorious battle of Gannōruva [against the Portuguese] in 1638’. Some of these would have married Sinhala women, just as other immigrants and foreign settlers did. It should be remembered, incidentally, that the Nāyakas were not Tamils but Telugu speakers, vaḍuga (northerners) originally from Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Madurai itself had important historical connotations for the Sinhalas, whose ancestral hero and founder, Vijaya, having discarded his demon-wife Kuveṇī, espoused a princess from Madurai as his mahēsi along with other Madurai women as wives for his followers. Both in mythic and practical terms, the Nāyakas of Madurai were hardly aliens and therefore marital
alliances with them could be seen as a further cementing of political and mythic
relations with Madurai.

The first marital alliance recorded in the Cūḷavāṃsa happened under king Rājasimha II, who ‘brought royal maidens [kaññā] from the city of Madhurā’. What is striking is that this marriage alliance must have occurred when the notable king Tirumala (r. 1623–59) reigned in Madurai. The overlap with Rājasimha’s reign gave the two plenty of time to contract an alliance against the Portuguese, who were a potential threat to Madurai’s integrity on grounds of their proselytism among the Paravas and other castes of the ‘Fishery Coast’. It is thus likely that Rājasimha obtained one or more of Tirumala’s daughters as his own mahēsi or mahēsis. Alternatively, the Cūḷavāṃsa statement that Rājasimha married royal maidens could be interpreted to mean that he might have brought home daughters of Madurai rājas and married some of them as secondary queens known as yakaḍa dōliya in Kandyan kingship, in contrast with ran dōliya, the chief queen or queens, a metaphorical distinction between palanquins (dōliya) of gold (ran) and iron (yakaḍa). Multiple chief queens or mahēsis (ran dōliya) were an acceptable Sri Lankan royal custom.

Rājasimha’s son Vimaladharmasūriya II (1687–1707) continued the Madurai connection in respect of marriage. The Cūḷavāṃsa states that he ‘took to wife the daughter of the queen who was brought from Madhura, and made her his chief queen’, implying that the king married his father’s mahēsi’s daughter. As for Vimaladharmasūriya’s son Narēndrasinha, Dewaraja is right to point to the official negotiations conducted in the Madurai kingdom by Lankan emissaries, as described in the Dutch sources. After a first unsuccessful mission around 1706 (when the powerful Madurai regent Mangammal was about to relinquish her rule to her grandson, the impetuous Chokkanātha), a second mission succeeded: the Kandyan side ‘fetched princesses from the town of Madura and made them first mahēsis’. Intriguingly the Cūḷavāṃsa wording implies that Narēndrasinha may have married ‘princesses’ belonging not necessarily to the ruling family sensu stricto. They may have been from a lateral line or even an unrelated, yet politically influential, family of the complex Madurai polity. What we do know for certain is that the princesses came with their own retinues of male and female relations, and that the impact of all these individuals at the court in Kandy must have been substantial, both ‘biologically’ and culturally. South Indian connections were, in essence, an integral part of the life of the Kandyan rulers through much of the seventeenth century already.

Virtually every Sri Lankan historian refers to Narēndrasinha, the son of Vimaladharmasūriya II, as the ‘last Sinhala king’. It may thus be no surprise that Lorna Dewaraja should point, as we have seen already, to his ‘inadequate support of Buddhism’. The reality, however, is much more complex, and best understood if we observe religious matters as a part of the wider power struggles in the kingdom. Take the much-touted issue of an absence of fully ordained (upasampadā) monks. The first king to bring in monks to renew the ordination had been, as mentioned above, Vimaladharmasūriya I. Vimaladharmasūriya II again sent, in 1697
and with Dutch assistance, an embassy ‘to the country of Rakkhanga [Arakan] and invited the bhikkhu community with the thera [monk] Santana at the head’. Fifty-nine
Thirty-three monks arrived from Burma who, on the king’s orders, conferred the higher ordination on thirty-three ‘sons of good family’, and initiated as novices (sāmanera) another 120 men. By contrast, Rājasimha II and Narēndrasinha allowed full ordination to lapse again and made no moves to renew it. Difficulties in dispatching ships across a Dutch-dominated Bay of Bengal may have played a role, but certainly more significant was the dependence of both kings on powerful non-ordained monks known as ganinnās, those who did not wear the yellow robe but instead wore white or some other sartorial marker. Many belonged to the aristocracy and owned large estates, some served in the courts and as diplomats (for example, a certain Kobbākađuve Ganebanḍāra served repeatedly in negotiations with the Dutch), and a few even contracted marriages. Their knowledge of the doctrine was variable, although in theory they were supposed to be proficient in the Ten Precepts (uposatha) obligatory for novices, know the basics of Buddhist ethics and the main jātakas, and perform Buddhist rituals for lay folk. If the Cūḷavamśa categorically states that Narēndrasinha, at the start of his reign, ‘showed care for the bhikkhus who had been admitted to the Order during his father’s life’ and also ‘had many sons of good family submitted in faith to the ceremony of world-renunciation’, then we have to ask ourselves why, if not for political reasons, he should have allowed ordination to lapse again by around 1714. In my view the young king, in order to consolidate his position, was forced to compromise with the established ganinnās. This is the best possible explanation for an otherwise inexplicable action of the king in 1715, when he ordered the execution of an important monk, Sūriyagoda Rājasundara, for treason. The venerable Sūriyagoda had been ordained by the Arakanese delegation in 1697, and he must have got involved in some resistance against the young Narēndrasinha and the ganinnās. The latter clearly won the war, at least for the time being.

Again, once we question the supposedly natural connection between ‘the foreign’ and local discontent, and identify such conflicts as primarily political, the religious panorama appears much more fluid and complex in early eighteenth-century Kandy than is usually said. Kandyans, as we have seen, were not only familiar with the presence of outsiders and their religious beliefs, but clearly open to engaging with them without necessarily undermining their traditional faith in Buddhism. The Nāyaka migrants, in their turn, were particularly prone to eclectic combinations, worshipping Viṣṇu along with Śiva, the powerful goddess Mīnakṣī and many others. In Kandy they found shrines or dēvāles where they could easily worship Viṣṇu and Skanda (aka Murugan or Kataragama). As for Buddhism, from the view point of early Nāyaka immigrants, the Buddha was the ninth avatar of Viṣṇu and hence neither they (nor other Hindus until very recently) had any problem worshipping him. Gradually some of the Nāyakas would become more and more Buddhist, further encouraged by the inclusive practices of Rājasimha II, Vimaladharmasūriya II and Narēndrasinha.
As we now approach the reign of the first Nāyaka king of Kandy, Śri Vijaya Rājasimha (r. 1739–47), we ought to recognize how difficult it is to draw the dividing lines. Having grown up in Kandy from his very birth Śri Vijaya was surely acquainted with Buddhism, knew his Sinhala, and was familiar with the politics and culture of the court and society at large, including those of his Telegu kinfolk. He contracted a marriage (or marriages) with an influential royal family from Madurai, and his father-in-law Nārenappa Nāyaka later became one of the most powerful persons at court. It is impressive that Śri Vijaya’s queens soon became ‘good Buddhists’. According to the Cūḷavamsa ‘they gave up the false faiths to which they had long been attached and adopted in the best manner possible the true [Buddhist] faith’, worshipping the Tooth Relic day by day with many offerings. Most strikingly, ‘they kept constantly the five moral commandments and the uposatha vows [the ten precepts] even on days that were not uposathas’. Among their acts of piety described in great detail, they also ‘had sacred books copied’. Naturally ‘they were highly regarded in the whole of island of Lanka’. This account of the Nāyaka queens is the longest description of any instance of female Buddhist piety in the whole Mahāvaṃsa/Cūḷavamsa. It was as easy for the Nāyakas to slip from Vaishnavism to Buddhism as it is for anyone to slip from seeing the Buddha as the ninth avatar of Viṣṇu to seeing Viṣṇu as a kind of avatar of the Buddha.

But could we see all this as just an attempt by a foreign-minded king to be more Buddhist than the Buddhists? Certainly not, albeit the picture is again rather complex. Śri Vijaya Rājasimha combined two religious strategies that had not quite gone together so closely before. On the one hand, he attempted to reintroduce the upasampadā ordination that Narêndrasinha had neglected. On the other hand, and more disturbingly, he persecuted the Catholics. On the first front, it seems clear that the king felt strong enough to defy the power of the ganinnāsēs and the entrenched aristocratic class. But this task could not succeed without the cooperation of the Dutch. While the king’s first attempt was to restore the ordination through Pegu in Burma, failure on this front forced him to contact Ayutthaya in Thailand with Dutch help. Although the death of the Kandyan king in 1747 resulted in a cancellation of this endeavour, the dynamic was not broken, and the ordination went ahead in the reign of Kīrti Śri Rājasimha (r. 1747–82). This indicates quite clearly, in my view, the growing power and confidence of the Nāyakas in Kandy and their sustained power struggle against established interests, but also their ability to play successfully on the international field.

It would make sense to assume that Śri Vijaya Rājasimha’s persecution of the ‘Portuguese’ and other Catholics may have had to do both with this confidence and the Dutch factor. According to the Cūḷavamsa:

The infamous Parangis, the infidels, the impious ones who at the time of King Rajasiha [Rājasimha II] had still remained behind in the town and now dwelling here and there, rich in cunning, endeavored by gifts of money and the like to get their creed adopted by others, lead a life without reverence
for the doctrine (of the Buddha). When the king heard thereof he became vehemently indignant, issued commands to the dignitaries, had their houses and their books destroyed and banished from the country those who did not give up their faith.  

However, a third condition needs to be taken into account. I believe that the hostility to Catholics developed in Kandy only during the second phase of Oratorian proselytism, after the death of Joseph Vaz in 1711. This phase was dominated by the work of Jacome Gonçalvez, another Konkani Brahmin who arrived in the kingdom in 1706 and stayed until his death in 1742. Narêndrasinha was well-disposed in principle to Gonçalvez, but Gonçalvez was quite unlike Vaz. He was a militant type of missionary in the spirit of Francis Xavier. He was openly hostile to Buddhism and to Dutch Protestantism, using his thorough familiarity with idiomatic Sinhala and Tamil, not so much to build bridges but rather to tear them down. His enormous theological and polemic output began with _Upadesa_ (‘advice’ or ‘instructions’) in Sinhala and Tamil and a catechism of Catholic doctrine, followed by a mass of popular and theological work in Sinhala (and Tamil) that made him the leading exponent of Sinhala Catholicism. According to Father S. G. Perera, ‘perhaps his greatest achievement was that he enriched the Sinhalese language’, replacing the stilted terminology operative at that time with idiomatic Sinhala ‘to convey the essentially Christian ideas of the one true God, Church, Sacrament, Eucharist, Gospel, Confession and the like’. Consequently, ‘for the first time in the history of Ceylon, Catholics were able to read explanations and vindication of their faith in their mother tongue, in compositions that vied with the Buddhist classics in elegance and purity of language’. Among Gonçalvez’s many works listed by Don Peter is _Vēda Kāvyaya_ in 528 stanzas on the life of Christ and his teachings and modelled apparently on the great Sinhala Buddhist classic of _Vīdāgama_, the _Buduguṇāṅkāraya_ dealing with the life of the Buddha. These are no doubt remarkable achievements but it is hard to believe that they did not produce negative reactions and hostility among Buddhists, who were now being empowered by their own remarkable resurgence of faith under Saranāṃkara and his sophisticated novice followers popularly known as the _silvat samāgama_, ‘the pious community’. Gonçalvez tried to influence Śri Vijaya Rājasimha while he was still a ‘crown prince’ (Prince Asthāna), presenting him in 1737 a copy of the _Budumula_ (The Root of Buddhism), a refutation of Buddhism. But, as one might expect, ‘it failed to convert him’. Śri Vijaya, owing to the serious illness of Narêndrasinha, was the de facto ruler already, and chose to maintain an image of a good Buddhist under the influence of Saranāṃkara. Gonçalvez was also an unrelenting anti-Calvinist polemicist, confronting in one of his most famous debates Nauclairs de la Nerolle, a French Calvinist active at the Kandyan court. Defending the worshipping of images as an aspect binding Catholics and Buddhists together, one might have expected the Oratorian’s stance to be successful. But Gonçalvez’s venture backfired on both fronts, providing ammunition to his Buddhists and also Dutch opponents.
The complexity of the situation comes out beautifully in a Catholic report from 1746.⁷¹ From the viewpoint of the Portuguese, the villains were the heretical Dutch who were supported by Saranāmkaṇa and a couple of the ministers of the court and especially the governor (disāva) of the Four Korales, an area that already had seen considerable proselytization during Portuguese times. According to the ‘report’, the Dutch failed to incite the king, but stirred up ‘commotion among the sangatares, or priests of the Budun, and the Chingala common people’.⁷² They threatened Śrī Vijaya with revolt if he favoured the Christian community, namely the Catholics, and tried to win ‘Ganne Villivata’ [Valivita Saranāmkaṇa] with ‘a good deal of money’.

Thus, the Chingalas, allied with the heretics [Dutch], demanded that as our Fathers were the authors of these books [that were] contrary to the doctrine of the Budum which they follow, the king should give a command to arrest them, confiscate their properties, have them brought before him, and destroy the churches they had built in his kingdom.⁷³

The ministers, whether or not with the king’s permission, did what the Dutch requested and what their own passions dictated. Thus ‘each disava sent order to his province where there were Christians, to seize the missionaries, bring them to the capital, confiscate their property and destroy the churches’.⁷⁴ One of the influential ministers (Adikārama or Adigar in popular usage) ‘ordered the church of Candia to be surrounded’, and had Father Mathias Rodrigues taken and all church property confiscated on 17 March 1744.⁷⁵ In effect, wherever possible missionaries were pushed out of the areas under Kandyan and Dutch control. According to this report, the Dutch ambassador (‘the deadliest enemy’) instigated Saranāmkaṇa to threaten the king, and said that his monks would ‘either kill themselves or quit the country of Ceylao if the king and his councilors allowed the missionaries to remain in the realms’.⁷⁶ The king then ordered the expulsion of the missions.⁷⁷ According to another Catholic report, the king was sympathetic to Catholicism and so was another influential minister but both were compelled to withdraw their support of the missions. Needless to say, this was not primarily a matter of doctrine, and the king acted under heavy political pressure.⁷⁸ Although the persecution was a reality, the missionaries found support in the vast and relatively uncharted area of the Vanni. When exactly things went back to normal is not clear, but there is no evidence that the Nāyaka kings who followed Śrī Vijaya evinced a comparable hostility to Catholicism. Consequently, it is likely that Catholics continued as an important presence in the Kandyan kingdom.⁷⁹ The Dutch, by contrast, fell out with Kīrti Śrī very early in the latter’s reign, seeking alliances with local chiefs against him well before military confrontations began in 1762. They thus created the conditions for the more radical demonization of Śrī Vikrama during early British times, in substantial measure propelled by the spy John D’Oyly – an issue to be explored in a forthcoming work.⁸⁰
Let us stay with the Dutch then, but only insofar as they can throw additional light on some changes in Kandyan court culture during the late eighteenth century. It is in Narêndrasinha’s reign and in connection with the VOC’s diplomatic and military strategies that we have the first clear example of Madurai ceremonialism in Sri Lanka, along with a version of cosmic kingship that began to radically change the norms governing the earlier traditions of Kandyan kingship. A key event may have been the visit of the Dutch governor Joan Wilhelm Schnee to Kandy in 1732, recorded in detail by a prominent Sinhala interpreter from the low country. I shall focus here on the style in which the Dutch ambassador was received in Narêndrasinha’s court. Let us start with the embassy arriving in the proximity to the city where it was met by four major Kandyan chiefs and thereupon it ‘moved on through two rows of armed lascorins [lascars] with a line of tusked elephants on one side amidst the whirling of lighted flambeaux’ until it reached the first gate of the palace (vāhalkaḍa). There the embassy officials were met by still higher echelons of the bureaucracy, the second adigar (one of two chief ministers) and the disāvas of three of the most powerful districts, namely, Sabaragamuva, the Seven Kōrales and Four Kōrales. The adigar on the king’s orders informed the ambassador to bring with him the letter of authorization while his secretary and interpreter would wait in the neighbourhood of the king’s Audience Hall (dakina sālvā). After some time the ambassador received the letter from the hands of several lesser officials (appuhāmis), who then placed the letter on his head and climbed up the stone steps to the audience hall. The interpreter took his position on the ambassador’s right, while the two adigars and the disāvas grouped themselves on either side as the following events unfolded:

After a short pause the seven curtains were drawn aside and revealed His Gracious Majesty seated on his throne. Immediately the Ambassador sank on his knee, while the rest of the chiefs and I [the interpreter] prostrated ourselves six times; we then entered the Hall of Audience repeating the same salutation at three places. On reaching the edge of the carpet which was spread in front of the Throne, His Majesty commanded that the letter should be presented […]. Thereupon the rest of the chiefs advanced with the Ambassador, and as he knelt on one of the steps leading to the throne, His Majesty took the letter in his own royal hand and commanded the chiefs to place it with its wrappings and the silver tray on his right, which they immediately did. The Ambassador then immediately removed his hat and saluted according to custom, and moved backwards with the chiefs till he reached the middle of the carpet, where he remained kneeling on one knee.

Much of this ceremonialism could be read simply as an exaggeration of the existing Kandyan ritualism, where the king is often enough treated and addressed as a god (deviyo). Narêndrasinha himself was known as ‘Kunḍasāle Deviyo’, the god of Kunḍasāle. Yet, the grand development of ‘abjection’, and especially the emergence of the king from behind seven curtains, are signs that a more radical concept
of divine kingship was at play. This does not necessarily indicate an instance of
direct South Indian ‘influence’, because ritual ceremonialism had been develop-
ing in the Kandyen court for some time before Narêndrasinha. Thus Râjasimha II
was known as ‘Râsin Deviyo’, the god Râjasimha, but there is no evidence that he
adopted the extreme ceremonialism that we have associated with the Nâyakas.
But we have to ask why this sudden stepping up in diplomatic ceremonial
occurred, at a time when Narêndrasinha was forty-two years old and had been
suffering from various illnesses since the early 1730s.\(^8^3\) It seems that the king’s
illness had begun to take its political toll, leaving important matters of state in the
hands of the designated successor, the future Śri Vijaya Râjasimha. And it would
not be surprising if we found that state ceremonialism was by this time under the
control of the king’s Nâyaka relatives, especially Śri Vijaya Râjasimha’s powerful
father-in-law. The full development of this form of ceremonialism occurred in the
reign of Kârti Śri Râjasimha, the successor of Śri Vijaya, and afterwards.

In any case, we need to handle this period with as much caution as the previ-
ous one. Historians have paid a heavy toll for seeing the later Nâyaka kings sim-
ply as ‘foreigners’ in a static political landscape dominated by tensions between
the ‘indigenous’ and the ‘exogenous’ or the ‘foreign’. As we have seen, the Nâyakas
in Kandy were a little of both, allowing for polemics to crystalize around their
perceived alien-ness in certain moments and contexts, but by no means as a fixed
condition and an inevitable necessity. Kârti Śri Râjasimha’s was certainly more
vulnerable than others to being picked out as a foreigner because he did not suc-
ceed Śri Vijaya in direct line (he was in fact the brother of the late king’s wife).\(^8^4\) It
seems that the sense of Nâyaka foreignness began to be developed as a matter of
public discourse during his regime when a few influential aristocrats and monks
grew increasingly hostile to him and decided to label him as an alien Tamil. This
was encouraged by deliberate misinformation on the part of the Dutch who feared
his ambitions in the Maritime Provinces and resisted his indigenization by label-
ing him a ‘Malabar’, a synonym for ‘Tamil’. Are there ‘signs’ that might allow us to
‘test’ the ruler’s sense of identity because historians are anything but straightfor-
ward in their representations of this king? John Holt has pointed out that Kârti Śri
Râjasimha had strong Śaivite beliefs and that these were part of his own inherited
tradition.\(^8^5\) One hostile account written in the late nineteenth century says that he
daubed himself in sacred ash.\(^8^6\) Even if this late rumour were true, we know that
the same practice was rather common for ordinary persons, especially when they
worshipped at Skanda shrines. The accusation thus only made sense in connection
with a wider discourse of exclusion directed against the king on grounds that he
was an outsider who became king by default. It is possible that Kârti Śri Râjasimha
knew little or no Sinhala when he was selected to be king at age sixteen, but it is
certain that he picked it up later. He gave his own strong signs of Buddhist piety,
which cannot be reduced to a simple façade. Remember it was Kârti Śri Râjasimha
who helped institute the Siamese fraternity, today’s dominant order of Buddhist
monks. Although Kârti Śri Râjasimha supported Saranaṃkara as the head of the
newly instituted Siamese fraternity, the latter in conjunction with a few
influential monks and aristocratic officials attempted – unsuccessfully – to assassinate him in 1759. It is to Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha’s credit that although he executed some of the conspirators, he did not exact revenge on Saranāṃkara, who under Kandyan law could have suffered the death penalty. Thanks to his sustained commitment to Buddhist orthodoxy he ended as a popular king for the generality of the Sinhala public, as did his Nāyaka successors Rājadhi Rājasimha (1782–98) and Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha (1798–1815) both born and raised in Sri Lanka. The former was a good Buddhist extolled in Cūḷavaṃsa and a pundit who rendered a well-known text, Asadruṣa Jātaka, in 598 stanzas, a remarkable achievement by any standard. A strange Nāyaka indeed! Yet in the historiographical tradition, Nāyakas have all been subjected to exclusion again and again.

Nevertheless, it was during the Nāyaka reigns that the model of sacred kingship we first encountered in the 1730s fully unfolded wherein the divinity of the king was emphasized as never before. I believe that when any Sinhala king is consecrated he becomes a divine being but how that sense of the divine is expressed in courtly life is another issue. With the Nāyakas the divinity of the king and the ceremonialism associated with it developed to a degree unthinkable earlier, even in the case of the powerful Rājasimha II (Rāsin Deviyo). The public prostrated before the Kandyan kings because they too were ‘gods’ and thus their ‘abjects’. Nonetheless, these ideas were carried to an extreme degree in Nāyaka kingship. With that came a series of rules on public life designed to keep the king away from the public gaze and enhance his exceptional status, very likely based on the conventions of Madurai of that time. Consider the following episode from the reign of King Ranga Krisna Muttu Vīrappa (r. 1682–89), illustrating the Nāyaka ruler’s attempt to humiliate the representatives of a Muslim ruler:

When they were ushered into the presence of the King, after some little delay and with an absence of deference on the part of the gentlemen ushers which astonished and angered them not a little; the Nabobs found the King seated on a gorgeous throne, splendidly arrayed and resplendent with jewels; and surrounded by a brilliant staff of ministers and courtiers skilfully grouped together with a view to scenic effect, whilst the hall of audience had been magnificently furnished and decorated for the occasion.

With Nāyaka kingship in India in steep decline precisely at the time of its Sri Lankan ascendancy, it was in Kandy that this cultural practice was fully formed, intensified to impress not only foreign envoys but also the Sri Lankan public and the Nāyakas themselves. This comes out very vividly in the report of the British embassy of John Pybus in 1762. As the envoy attempted to approach Kīrti Śrī, he had to put up with humiliating ceremonials unthinkable among earlier Kandyan kings. Three decades later, the British representative Robert Andrews experienced the same sort of ceremonials and gave a graphic account of them in 1795–6. Andrews tells us that when he visited the palace of Rajadhi Rājasimha, Kīrti Śrī Rājasimha’s successor, seven curtains were drawn, finally allowing him to see:
the Sovereign of Candia arrived in all his glory seated on a Throne of solid Gold studded with precious Stones of various Colors [A] Crown of Massy Gold adorned his brows and enriched with valuable and shining Gems the product of his native Sovereignty [T]he moment he blazed upon our sight Lieutenant Kingston and myself (with the salver on my head) were directed to kneel while Native Courtiers who attended us prostrated themselves on the ground.90

The Dutch ambassadors even at the time of Narēndrasinha used to only bend on one knee before the king but by the time of Rājādhi Rājasimha in 1782 they were forced to perform complicated ceremonials of abjection, which they thoroughly resented.91 During the later Nāyaka reign, says Lorna Dewaraja, only the king could build a two-storey house and ‘in the vicinity of Kandy the use of tiles and lime was prohibited except in the temples’.92 In the capital city, adds Dewaraja, only the king and the gods could be accompanied with drums and within the larger city the use of palanquins, horse or elephant or use of footwear were prohibited (although Kandyans did not wear footwear and even kings for the most part abstained using them). John Pybus had to get off his palanquin and ‘trudge ankle deep in mud through the miry paths of Kandy’.93 There is no gainsaying the fact that such prohibitions had been for the most part alien to the earlier Kandyan kings. It would have been impossible for Vimaladharmasūriya II and Narēndrasinha to converse and entertain Catholic priests in such a stultifying atmosphere. Nevertheless, once outside the capital, the kings visited the provinces and went on pilgrimages to Buddhist sacred sites. This means that the Kandyan cosmopolitan ethos came under siege but did not succumb. Nāyakas after Kīrti Śri continued to be open to persons of different nationalities and were not hostile to the many Catholics domiciled in the Kandyan territories or for that matter to Brahmans and wandering ascetics from the neighbouring subcontinent. Perhaps part of the resentment of the Nāyakas by monks and the aristocracy was not to their being ‘too foreign’ but, ironically, to their excessive imitation of divinity. These, however, are issues that need further exploration.

Note, again, how none of this happened against a backdrop of the ruler challenging Buddhism, but rather of enriching it. Kīrti Śri, although a staunch Hindu, was also staunchly Buddhist and more so surely after he engaged in the construction of a large number of temples and engaged in Buddhist practices. As Dewaraja herself acknowledges, one of the first acts of his reign was to ‘reclaim the Peak from the Śaivites (who had occupied it in the time of Rajasimha I) revive its rites and ceremonies, endow it with valuable lands and restore it to its pristine sanctity’.94 True, he made some important changes in the annual procession associated with the Tooth Relic during the month of āśela, generally in July or August – but certainly not to undermine it. Kīrti Śri Rājasimha incorporated the popular Hindu gods Viṣṇu, Skanda, Nātha and the goddess Pattini into the public ritual associated with the processional events at the Palace of the Tooth Relic. By doing this, he created one of the most popular spectacles that the Sri Lankan public enjoys to this very day. The blend is so enticing that, ironically, these rituals
with their displays of music and dance are now regarded by many as part of an ancient Sinhala tradition. In this sense Kīrti Śri was a great inventor of tradition – but even he knew exactly where to draw the line, and refrained from introducing the Hindu gods anywhere near the inner sanctum of the Palace of the Tooth Relic. Viṣṇu or Skanda could not be allowed to compete, as gods and as kings, with the Buddha as the ‘god among gods’ (*devāti deva*).

The Tooth Relic was inextricably tied with Lankan kingship, and all Nāyaka kings not only respected and worshipped it but also saw to its safe upkeep and maintenance. Lankan kings may contract all sorts of rituals of consecration, but none could replace the need to possess the sacred Tooth Relic. Parākramabāhu I (r. 1153–86), for example, could only assume full kingship when he obtained the relic formerly in possession of the ruler of Ruhuna, the southern division of the Tri Sinhala. The same ambitions guided Parākramabāhu II and Parākramabāhu IV. The king as *rājā is empty of significance unless his capital contains the Tooth Relic. Incidentally, the king’s palace is in general small in comparison with the ‘palace’ housing the relic, as are the shrines of even major gods such as Viṣṇu, Skanda, Vibhīṣaṇa, Saman, Nāṭha and Pattini – a marked contrast with Indian kingship, including Madurai, where palaces *and* temples were of magnificent proportions. It is the British who produced a radical change in the cosmic significance of the Tooth Relic when they appropriated it and later redefined the office of the Diyavaḍana Nilame (*the water bearer*) as the guardian and custodian of the Palace of the Tooth Relic. That is an innovation without precedent in the history of Sri Lanka.

There can be little doubt that tensions existed during the Kandyan period between different religious communities. But one must recognize that when we speak of a religious culture we also concomitantly speak of the political. Much of what I have emphasized in this chapter pertains to the domain of the political that then is seen or rationalized in terms of the religious. In Kandy, as with the world in general, the political and the religious are in intimate relation with one another, although for analytical purposes we might want to disaggregate them as separable entities.

It seems from our account that the cosmopolitan discourse has stood in a field of tension between those who wished to resolve inter-religious issues and those who wished to perpetuate them. Cosmopolitanism is never a fixed entity, it is a matter of constant negotiation, at the mercy of different ways of interpreting and appropriating the ‘foreign’. The foreign can, without losing its supra-local connections, be a valuable addition to whatever constitutes the local. The interplay between the local and the foreign is not simply a phenomenon of Nāyaka rule but existed in different shapes and forms in Lankan history and, one might even add, in the history of other nations. But then: this is not a matter of kingship alone because the indigenization of ‘foreigners’ and ‘outsiders’ has been a historical phenomenon the world over, a larger issue that I cannot deal with here.