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Slave Trade and Slavery in Asia—New Perspectives

KATE EKAMA

**Precarious Freedom: Manumission in
Eighteenth-Century Colombo**

Abstract

In the historiography of slave-owning societies, manumission has been a contentious topic. Based on the assumption that manumission rates and the level of cruelty in a slave-owning society were closely related, historians have used research on manumission to rank slave societies based on a scale from “mild” to “harsh.” More recent research on manumission has eschewed this problematic approach, instead probing gradations of freedom. This article aims to contribute to our understanding of manumission and slavery by questioning how the formal, legal process of manumission altered the lived experience of individuals. Examining legal sources that shed light on the complexities of manumission in eighteenth-century Colombo, it considers the social strategies employed to achieve and defend free status. The records show that manumission did not sever the master-slave relationship: obligations and relations of debt continued to bind the formerly enslaved to former slave-owning families. Studying court records involving individuals responding to the possibilities and limitations of manumission, this study shows that freed status was precarious and, like bondage, was not an unalterable state.

Introduction

In the historiography of slave-owning societies, manumission, understood as the freeing of enslaved individuals—distinct from emancipation, which was the legislated end to slave ownership in a society—has been a contentious topic. Manumission rates in various slave societies across time and space have been the object of study. Based on the assumption that manumission rates and the level of cruelty in a slave-owning society were closely related, historians have used research on manumission to rank slave societies based on a scale from “mild” to “harsh.”¹ More recent research on manumission has eschewed this problematic approach, instead probing gradations of freedom.²

Scholars of slavery and slaving in the Indian Ocean world generally agree that conceptualizing slavery as the antithesis of freedom is simplistic and unhelpful. Gwyn Campbell’s and James Watson’s work has been particularly influential

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Image 1 “The town of Colombo in Ceylon viewed from the north.” Jan Brandes, 1785. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

in conceptualizing slavery in the Indian Ocean world beyond the terms and ideas inherited from Atlantic slavery studies. Their research, and that of others, highlights the importance of relationships of obligation that cut across the division between slave and non-slave.³ Gwyn Campbell and Edward Alpers argue that in the Indian Ocean world, slavery was not always clearly distinguishable from other forms of forced labor.⁴ Rather than the binaries of “slave” and “free,” the authors conceive of relationships in a “social hierarchy of dependence.”⁵

How do these insights reshape our understanding of manumission? If we accept the need to move beyond the binaries of slave and free, then manumission cannot be understood as simply becoming free. In the context of multiple and overlapping relationships of bondage and/or obligation, how did the formal, legal process of manumission alter the lived experience of individuals? To begin to answer this question, this article examines legal sources that shed light on the complexities of manumission in eighteenth-century Colombo. More precisely, legal sources reveal the agency of individuals and the social strategies they employed to achieve and defend free status. In addition, the records show that former slaves continued to shoulder obligations toward their former masters based on the Roman law *obsequium* as well as additional labor requirements specified in manumission deeds. For some freed people, relationships of debt characterized their continuing relationship with the former slave-owning family. Moreover, these sources show that the revocation of manumission deeds, and consequent re-enslavement, was not an idle threat. This evidence confirms that manumission did not cleanly sever the master-slave relationship; freedom in eighteenth-century Colombo was precarious.

The port city of Colombo was an integral part of the Dutch East India Company’s (VOC) imperial web of operations in the Indian Ocean. Considering the city’s place in the VOC world, comparisons to the VOC Cape highlight similarities and differences between the practice of manumission in the two company ports. Beyond that, it is instructive to bear in mind the wider

context of European slavery in the Indian Ocean world. Manumission of enslaved people was a feature of societies in other parts of the Indian Ocean world that had been colonized by, for instance, the British and the French.⁶ Moreover, in the late eighteenth century, waves of change began to swell in the Indian Ocean as early abolitionist thinking started to cohere into demands to suppress or ban the trade in enslaved people and to emancipate those held in slavery.⁷

Manumission in VOC Colombo

The Dutch East India Company conquered Colombo from the Portuguese in 1656 and inherited the legacy of Portuguese colonization of the city, including slavery.⁸ The company itself owned slaves to labor on the fortifications, among other manual labor projects; inhabitants of Colombo owned slaves in their private capacity, too, and set them to work within and beyond the household. Slave-holding was widespread in the port city: civilian and military company officials, Europeans, and local and foreign Asians owned enslaved individuals.⁹ What proportion of the eighteenth-century population of Colombo and its surroundings was constituted by the enslaved is unfortunately unknown due to lack of census data for the period, but, in the late 1600s, the enslaved population accounted for over 50 percent of the population of the fort and town, and most of these individuals were owned by Europeans, a situation that may have continued into the 1700s.¹⁰ Over more than a century and a half of VOC rule, enslaved individuals were transported to the island from across the Indian Ocean region as the Dutch tapped into existing slave trade routes. The island was also a source of slaves who were transported to other VOC establishments.¹¹ These men and women were part of the forced migration networks of the company, which included slaves, convicts, and exiles.¹²

The VOC authorities in Colombo provided the legal apparatus necessary to manumit both company-owned and privately owned enslaved individuals. Manumission deeds, called “emancipation letters” (*emancipatiebrieven*) in the documents themselves, were drawn up in the Council of Justice and signed by the various parties involved. The deeds remained in the Council of Justice—that is, they were not handed over to the freed slave or the former master—and now form part of that section of the VOC archive.¹³ The manumission deeds kept in the VOC records were distinct from “letters of freedom” (*vrijbrieven*) that former slaves carried with them as proof of their freed status.

From the bundles of deeds that have survived, it is clear that individual documents were drawn up for each slave who was manumitted, except in the case that a mother and children were freed together. Manumission deeds did not include details about the slave to be freed, other than her first name; no information about origin, age, or occupation was given. As legal documents, the deeds followed a set pattern and contained some combination of six elements. The deed begins with the slave-owner’s declaration that he manumits his slave of his own accord, “without inducement, persuasion or deception by anyone in the world.”¹⁴ If a reason was given for the manumission, it followed as the second element. The third element was the *bewijs*—proof that the owner had rights to the slave, which he then renounced. If the slave was bound to certain conditions after manumission, they followed next. The fifth element, paying ten

Table 1. Manumitted slaves, 1750–52 and 1779–95

Period	Total slaves manumitted	Of whom male (%)	Of whom female (%)	Unknown sex (%)
1750–52	68	26 (38.2%)	38 (55.9%)	4 (5.9%)
1779–95	127	44 (34.7%)	83 (65.4%)	0

Source: SLNA 1/4145, 1/4146.

nijksdaalders (rds.) to the church, was essentially an administrative cost and was required after 1773.¹⁵ The final element was always a requirement: for a period of six years, at least one person—a guarantor—had to take financial responsibility for the freed person to ensure that she did not become a burden to anyone, most importantly, the parish poor fund. Two series of these deeds, in which close to two hundred enslaved people were manumitted, form the basis of the following analysis.

Freeing Men and Women

The gendered dynamics of slavery are inescapable when considering the topic of manumission. As in other places in the Indian Ocean world, in Colombo many more enslaved women were manumitted than men.¹⁶ The data indicate that around two-thirds of manumissions were of enslaved women and girls. During the first period under consideration, February 1750 to June 1752, a total of sixty-eight slaves were manumitted, of whom thirty-eight were female (55.9 percent), and twenty-six were male (38.2 percent), while in four cases (5.9 percent), the slave's sex was not specified and could not be determined by the given name. These figures are depicted in [table 1](#). Because deeds did not include a slave's age, a distinction cannot be made between women and girls and men and boys. Even in cases in which a slave woman was freed with her children, we cannot assume that the children were minors. For instance, in 1794, Alida was freed with her daughter Bintang, but Bintang was already old enough to have two children of her own, Kassim and Patra.¹⁷ During the second period, from February 1779 to September 1795, 127 slaves were freed consisting of eighty-three female slaves and forty-four males. As in the earlier period, no distinction can be made based on age.

Unfortunately, data on the size of the privately owned, enslaved population of Colombo are entirely absent for the eighteenth century.¹⁸ As a result, manumission rates cannot be calculated. However, what we can conclude from the deeds is that during both periods under scrutiny, the majority of slaves manumitted were female. During the first period, almost 56 percent of slaves freed were female; over the second, longer period more than 65 percent of manumitted slaves were female. The category “unknown sex” makes it difficult to establish a shift in the pattern between the two periods—it is possible that over the course of the late eighteenth century the likelihood of a male slave being manumitted in fact decreased.

These figures for Colombo are in line with other slave societies, in which women were manumitted more frequently than men.¹⁹ Robert Shell showed

that across the Indian Ocean, at the VOC Cape, enslaved women were more often manumitted than men.²⁰ The Cape slave society was numerically dominated by men, who were imported to fulfill the labor needs of the VOC and private owners.²¹ The continued reliance on imported slave labor at the Cape makes the pattern of manumitting women all the more remarkable. As Shell points out, manumitting enslaved women entailed a double sacrifice from the owner's point of view: his slave-holding would not increase through any future births, and the children already born to the slave woman were manumitted with their mother.²² For the case of the Cape, Shell argues that concubinage explains the high proportion of female slaves manumitted at least until 1713: men freed their concubines in order to marry them. Shell concludes that these women and children "enjoyed greatly enhanced opportunities for freedom through their domestic connections and their conjugal liaisons with their owners."²³

The demographics of the enslaved population in Colombo were likely very different from those of the Cape, yet there are indications that there, too, sexual relations and children resulting from them provided enslaved women with an opportunity to negotiate manumission. In the absence of population data for eighteenth-century Colombo, the ratio of enslaved men and women is unknown. My impression from the Dutch sources is that the slave population of Colombo was more balanced than at the Cape. This was certainly the case for the late seventeenth century when the ratio of adult men to adult women was close to 1:1 among company-owned enslaved individuals.²⁴ It is likely that concubinage played a role even in the more balanced demographic situation of Colombo. According to a deed from 1738, Frans Gomes manumitted four slaves who formed his immediate family: he freed the enslaved woman Rosetta, who was his concubine, as well as their three children named Louisa, Agida, and Elisabeth. The children are described as "procreated by the deponent."²⁵ Slave families and those that at some point bridged the legal divide between enslaved and free are revealed in the manumission deeds only infrequently; wills provide more insight because men and women, enslaved and free, were named as heirs. These documents confirm that concubinage provides another part of the explanation for the high proportion of female slaves manumitted. In her insightful introduction to *Sex, Power, and Slavery*, Elizabeth Elbourne raises the question of whether or not sexual relations between master and enslaved, and in particular this route to manumission, meant that men and women experienced slavery in vastly different ways.²⁶ Rosetta's experience in Colombo, and others' experiences across the ocean, would indicate that that answer is yes. But, in a context of hierarchically ordered relationships of dependence, to what extent the experience of an enslaved concubine differed from that of a dependent wife warrants consideration.²⁷

Stated Reasons for a Change in Status

Providing a reason for manumitting a slave was not a requirement of drawing up manumission deeds in Colombo. Yet, many deeds did include a reason and, as a result, offer glimpses into the master-slave relationship and more interestingly, into the agency and social strategies of enslaved people. During the 1750s, more than 85 percent of deeds included a reason for manumission. By the later period, the figure had fallen closer to 46 percent. In both periods, three

Table 2. Reasons for manumission, 1750–52 and 1779–95

Reason	Number of enslaved (%)	
	1750–52	1779–95
No reason stated	10 (14.7%)	69 (59.8%)
“Good and faithful service”	30 (44.1%)	46 (32.3%)
Sum received	27 (39.7%)	12 (7.9%)
Exchange	1 (1.5%)	0 (0%)
<i>Total</i>	68 (100%)	127 (100%)

Source: SLNA 1/4145, 1/4146.

stated reasons for manumission can be seen in the deeds. Years of faithful service, expressed almost exclusively in the formulaic “good and faithful service,” and receipt of a sum of money were the two reasons most commonly stated. The third reason, exchange, was more exceptional, as [table 2](#) shows.²⁸

The most frequently stated reason for manumitting an enslaved person was “good and faithful service.” Scholars have cautioned against interpreting this purely as benevolence and grace on the part of the owner. Manumission of slaves as a reward was a means of increasing rather than diminishing the master’s hold over those who remained enslaved. Marc Kleijwegt states that “manumission [had] to be awarded to well-deserving slaves in order to keep the entire slave force under tight control.”²⁹ In this view, rewarding faithful slaves with manumission was a way of dangling a carrot, to encourage compliance. Similarly, the Statutes of Batavia—regulations compiled in the 1640s that became the foundation of company governance across the VOC world—offered manumission as a reward for an enslaved person who saved his master’s life.³⁰ Thus, Gwyn Campbell and Edward Alpers state that in the Indian Ocean world, “[i]ndividual manumission/redemption posed no threat to the slave system: The number of slaves affected was limited, sometimes by law; the possibility of manumission acted as an important psychological safety valve that helped temper the slaves’ impulse to revolt; and manumissions encouraged slave imports to replace those thus ‘freed.’”³¹ Rather than undermining slavery and slave-holding, manumission could serve to reinforce the system.

The second reason for manumission stated in the deeds was (self-)purchase. For specified sums of money, enslaved people redeemed themselves, or were redeemed by others, out of slavery. That enslaved men and women could purchase their own “freedom” brings to the fore the characteristic contradiction of slave-owning societies—that slaves were simultaneously people and property. In Spanish colonies in the Americas, manumission by purchase was a civil right. There, slave owners could not refuse an enslaved person the opportunity to buy himself out of slavery if he could pay the owner his appraised value. Thus, buying freed status was an option available to all enslaved persons, at least in theory.³² Manumission by (self-)purchase was not a civil right in the VOC world and likely not anywhere across the Dutch Empire.³³ However, purchase was a route to manumission used by both company-owned and privately owned enslaved people. Deeds bear out the availability of this option to the enslaved in

Colombo. During the 1750–52 period, almost 40 percent of slaves were manumitted as a result of purchase. For the later period, 1779–95, manumission by purchase dropped dramatically, to just below 10 percent. This lower figure represents twelve individuals, four males and eight females. Some were children who were bought out of bondage along with their mothers, such as Kastoerie and her daughter Thomasia, whose freed status was purchased from slave-owner Manuel Adam Fernando in 1786.³⁴

The deeds do not specify who provided the sum of money to the owner, thus there is no indication of whether the enslaved bought themselves out of bondage or if they were bought out of bondage by others. Some of the enslaved in Colombo had the means to earn money through wage labor, which would have allowed them to purchase manumitted status with their savings. This kind of wage labor was known as *koelijdienst*.³⁵ Enslaved people were also the recipients of sums of money and property via inheritance. Sums of money received as inheritance from deceased masters may have allowed enslaved people to pay for a route out of slavery. Some enslaved people inherited large amounts of money—in the hundreds of *rijksdaalders*—as well as land and buildings. A case in point is the will of Johanna Petronella Schade, in which numerous enslaved people were freed and left both property and money. Siblings Thomas and Thomasia inherited four hundred rds. each and a small outbuilding, while the slave family—Floris, his wife Lisie, and their two children, Bastiaan and Marie—were left two rooms behind Schade’s house and three hundred rds. between them.³⁶ These enslaved people and others like them would have had the means to buy themselves out of bondage.

The funds for manumission by purchase could also be provided by others. Kinship networks may go a long way in explaining who paid slave-owners the agreed sums for manumission. Research on the Cape has shown the importance of freed slaves, the so-called free black (*vrijswart*) community,³⁷ who redeemed family members out of slavery. Robert Shell has argued that at the Cape the free black population made considerable sacrifices to buy their family members, and sometimes their friends, out of bondage. In fact, proportionally, the free black population freed more slaves than any other group.³⁸ Similarly, it is possible that freed slaves in Colombo purchased the manumission of their kin. For the time being, the kinds of networks that may have underpinned such assistance in Colombo remain invisible.

The sums of money received by owners when enslaved people paid their way out of slavery or were bought out of bondage by others varied wildly in both the 1750–52 and 1779–95 series of deeds. Between 1750 and 1752, the sums varied from as low as thirty rds.—when Kandaijen and her two children Victoria and Domingo were freed in June 1750—to 225 rds. for Catharina’s manumission by purchase in December of the same year. Examples that fall between those extremes include: the manumission of two slave men, Adjeran, renamed Aalie, and Moettoe Carper, whose freed status cost a hundred rds. each; four slaves, two men and two women, who were freed for fifty rds. each; and Maria and her six children, who were manumitted for a sum that averaged out to thirty-six rds. per person.³⁹ What we can conclude from this is that not all owners demanded the full replacement value of their slave. Considering that the administrative cost of manumitting a slave—payment to the church—was ten rds., it is likely that the sum received by Kandaijen’s owner was intended

only to cover these costs. In Catharina's case, it is possible that she was a valuable slave—perhaps skilled—and that her owner demanded the replacement value in order to purchase another slave to take her place.

We see a similarly wide variation in the sums received for manumission by purchase in the period 1779–1795. On one end of the spectrum, Cardoes' manumission cost thirty rds.; on the other end of the spectrum, Achilles's owner was paid the enormous sum of 250 rds.⁴⁰ Variation in price likely depended on a number of factors, including the slave's age, level of skill, and relationship with his owner. The sum paid for manumission by purchase was surely set by the slave-owner; a generous master may have been more open to the idea of a slave buying himself out of bondage and so have set a reasonable price. Between the extremes of Cardoes and Achilles, the slave women Matra and Susanna and the slave man Lechumanne were manumitted for a hundred rds.; Kastoerie and her daughter together were manumitted for 138 rds. and Anna Cleopatra and her daughter Clarisa for 130 rds.; and Lea and Amaris were manumitted for fifty rds. each.⁴¹ Wilhelmina Elisabeth Schreuder manumitted Tipa in March 1786 and instead of "receipt of X rds." noted that Tipa "paid the value of her person" without specifying how much exactly Tipa was worth.⁴² No clear pattern emerges from these data regarding differences in the value of male and female slaves.

In one exceptional deed from the 1750–1752 series, the reason given was neither faithful service nor payment. Kito was manumitted in a deed dated January 13, 1751. She was manumitted because she supplied her master with a slave woman to take her place; Rosetta was given in bondage in exchange for Kito's release.⁴³ The only other deed that indicated such an exchange taking place was from 1739, when the company-owned slaves Perreman and Elappa were manumitted in exchange for Pasqual and Coridon.⁴⁴ It should be noted that Elappa, an enslaved woman, provided a male slave to take her place. Kito, Perreman, and Elappa were the only slaves in the periods 1738–1739, 1750–1752, and 1790–1795 to be freed by exchange in the Colombo records. Yet manumission by exchange was not unheard of in the VOC world. Susan Newton-King discusses the practice at the Cape: The enslaved man Johannes Morgh was freed because he provided the Company with "a sturdy male slave named Titus of Bengal' in exchange for himself."⁴⁵ Newton-King comments that "by the early 18th century it had become standard practice that any person requesting the manumission of a Company slave (including the slave himself or herself) should provide a 'sturdy male slave' as a substitute."⁴⁶ Worden comments that this practice "tended to reinforce rather than break down the pattern of slavery and to maintain slave numbers" but adds that most rural slaves, who would have been privately owned, were freed in wills without the condition of exchange.⁴⁷ That only three slaves were freed by exchange in Colombo in the periods 1738–1739, 1750–1752, and 1790–1795 indicates that exchange was not a common route to freed status.

From the stated reasons for manumission contained in the deeds, we can conclude that it is too simplistic to attribute manumission entirely to the generosity and decision-making of the slave-owner. It is surely more accurate to consider manumission as a process that was not only negotiated between master and slave but also involved other parties, who frequently provided the sums of money needed to buy an enslaved person out of bondage. As yet, the role of the

guarantors who stood surety for freed people is not entirely clear, but they may have been instrumental in providing sums of money for manumission by purchase.⁴⁸ The way deeds were drawn up foregrounds the role of the master, as he relinquished his rights over the person as property. But the reasons for manumission point to the agency and social strategies of the enslaved person herself, or perhaps her network, in achieving freed status. For some enslaved women and their children, concubinage was a way out of slavery; for others, (self-) purchase was a route to freed status; for very few, someone else's bondage brought their release. Manumission of enslaved people did not, however, mean a severing of the master-slave relationship. The obligations that characterized that continuing relationship are elaborated in the following section.

Long-Lasting Obligations

Just as bondage and freedom exist on a continuum rather than as binaries, manumission can be understood as altering rather than eradicating obligation, a shift in position on a sliding scale. For some enslaved men and women, manumission might have meant both legal freedom, that is freed status before the law, and reduced obligations, with only those specified by law having a bearing on their relationship with their former master. For others, manumission brought freed status but no appreciable change in their circumstances of labor. This can be seen in the conditions that were attached to the manumission of enslaved people, as specified in the deeds.

Harking back to the *obsequium* in Roman law, the Statutes of Batavia detailed the obligations that bound a formally manumitted slave to his former master. The manumitted person was required to show deference to the former master's family and was required to provide financial assistance should her former master fall on hard times. Transgressors would be "rigorously punished" or forced to labor in chains for life.⁴⁹

In addition to these obligations set out by law, individual deeds included conditions for manumission that imposed a heavier burden. In many wills and manumission deeds, owners specified that slaves had to continue working for their master or a specified member of his household and only after that individual's death would they enjoy unencumbered freedom. This practice existed elsewhere, including Batavia in the seventeenth century, as Henk Niemeijer has shown, and at the Cape, as will be discussed later.⁵⁰ In Colombo, manumission deeds included the condition that enslaved people continue to provide labor for the slave-owning family. For instance, the enslaved man Joseph, renamed Philip, was manumitted in 1779 by his owner Jean Brohier under the condition that he continue to serve Brohier until Brohier's death.⁵¹ Similarly, Klarinda and her daughters Elisabeth and Sara could only enjoy "freedom" after serving their mistress's daughter Anna Sicilia de Moor until her death.⁵² During the period 1750–52, almost 90 percent of slaves manumitted were freed without any conditions; just over 10 percent continued to be bound to provide labor. Some forty years later, that figure had doubled: 21 percent of the enslaved men and women who were manumitted were held to the condition that they continue to labor for the slave-owning family.

There does not seem to have been a gendered aspect to conditional manumission in Colombo. Conditions attached to manumission were equally likely

for male and female enslaved people manumitted in the period 1779–95. For both genders, around 20 percent of those manumitted were required to continue laboring for their former masters.⁵³

What circumstances could explain the two-fold increase in the proportion of enslaved people manumitted with added labor conditions? The local labor market is one possible avenue of research to pursue in answering the question. Increasing wages may have been a deterrent in losing the labor of enslaved people, making it more attractive to bind freed people to the household for years. This however, rests on the assumption that an individual who was manumitted with labor conditions would not have received wages or, if she did, would have received below market rates. Another possible explanation could be that conditional manumission was a means of passing the costs of board and lodging onto the freed person without losing the labor of that individual. If the costs of maintaining enslaved people was increasing, then conditional manumission may have been increasingly attractive. A third possible explanation could be related to growing concern regarding abolitionist thought and the spread of ideas regarding emancipation. Uncertainty regarding the future of slave trade and ownership may have made the continued labor of freed people increasingly attractive to former slave-owners.⁵⁴ However, the spread of abolitionist ideas may have been a deterrent to manumitting enslaved people in the first place, if uncertainty regarding future slave supplies was growing. Further research of the local conditions in Colombo around forms of labor and wage levels is necessary to pursue an explanation for the increase in conditional manumission between the 1750s and the 1790s.

The numbers for 1750s Colombo are on a par with the figures that Shell calculated for the Cape. According to Shell, 88 percent of slaves at the Cape were freed unconditionally, and it is therefore “quite clear that most manumitted slaves left their owners’ families behind to enjoy real freedom.”⁵⁵ While this is perhaps too optimistic a view of manumission, it is clear from his data that the vast majority of manumitted people were not legally bound to provide the former slave-owning family with labor. By the late eighteenth century, those manumitted in Colombo were more likely than those in the earlier period or at the Cape to be exchanging one form of bondage for another. Because of the continued extraction of labor by the former master, conditional manumission can be seen as a grey area between the legal status of slave and freed person: the enslaved person had been freed—manumission had been promised and a deed drawn up—yet that “freedom” was incomplete. A significant aspect of this was that the conditionally manumitted person could not sell her own labor.⁵⁶

The Colombo records include an interesting case in which a woman apparently paid her way out of conditional manumission. On October 12, 1751, Saviel Britoe Fernando manumitted the enslaved woman Magdalena. The reason provided was receipt of fifty rds. What is significant about this deed is that it included the detail that Magdalena had been manumitted two years earlier by Fernando’s wife, Maria de Croes, provided that Magdalena serve de Croes’ son until the time that he married. It appears that Saviel Fernando defied his wife’s wishes and released Magdalena from the labor condition attached to manumission; or rather, Magdalena paid her way out of the labor obligations of her manumission.⁵⁷



Image 2 “View of Colombo from Slave Island.” Jan Brandes, 1785. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

There is a second remarkable feature of Magdalena’s situation—namely, the delay between manumission by the wife and the date of the manumission deed, which, according to the deed itself, was two years. How can we explain this gap? Academic lawyers Boudewijn Sirks and Jan Hallebeek use the term informal manumission to denote a period of time during which the process of manumission was incomplete. Sirks and Hallebeek’s research was based on an eighteenth-century civil case from the Council of Justice, Colombo, involving the slaves of deceased Ursula Pieris on the one side and her heirs on the opposing side. The (former?) slaves at the center of the case had been granted testamentary manumission by Ursula Pieris in 1744. In 1751, formal manumission deeds were drawn up and signed by some of Pieris’s heirs. The deeds lay incomplete until 1757, when the (former?) slaves went to court to force the remaining heirs to complete the deeds. Sirks and Hallebeek point out that the elapsed time between the initial drafting of the deed and the slaves’ petition to the court, some six years, lined up with the length of time for which guarantors had to stand surety. They suggest that this period, from 1751–57, was one of informal freedom.⁵⁸ It is possible that Magdalena’s experience of manumission comprised a period of informal manumission before she was in a position to buy her way out of the labor conditions attached to formal manumission. For her as well as for Pieris’s slaves, manumission was very clearly a process.

That men and women were formally manumitted under conditions—those of the *obsequium* and additional labor obligations—points to the long-lasting nature of obligations in the relationship between former slaves and their masters. The *obsequium* conditions attached to manumission came with promised punishments for contravention. It is likely that the labor conditions did too. One can imagine a scenario in which the former master withheld a manumitted slave’s *vrijbrief* until the period of conditional manumission had ended. Or perhaps refusal to sign a manumission deed was used to encourage compliance with the conditions. It is also possible that the threat of re-enslavement hung over the manumitted slave as an inducement to work. Just as slavery was not an unalterable state, neither was freedom.

A Precarious Position

For some men and women, the threat of re-enslavement that hung over their freed status became a reality. Manumission could be formally revoked, bringing about a reversal of the change in status that had been granted. In this section, I will examine three such cases, involving a freed man named Thomas and two women named Sabina and Helena. The cases of Sabina and Helena, in

particular, reveal their ability to use VOC institutions to exert agency in order to defend their status as free women.

Thomas

Thomas appears in the eighteenth-century VOC records only briefly. No details of his place or date of birth, language, caste, creed, kin, and life experience are known. On February 25, 1794, the enslaved man Thomas was manumitted by his master “under this constraint: that he Thomas will be obliged to continue to serve his master and his master’s wife as long as they live and show obedience.” Within the year, in December 1794, the deed was scratched out and a note was added at the bottom: “Under the authority of the decision of the Honourable Council of Justice of this Castle, from this date the emancipation deed will be rescinded.”⁵⁹ The rescinding of a deed indicates that freed status was precarious; the legal, formal manumission of an enslaved person could be reversed. The reversal was ordered by the Colombo Council of Justice, without stating the basis of the court’s decision. While it is possible that for Thomas the reason the deed was rescinded was nonadherence to the conditions of manumission—that he labor for his former masters until their death—there are other possibilities, including debt. Thomas’s experience of precarious freed status was not unique in eighteenth-century Colombo: other freed people were re-enslaved too by the formal withdrawal of manumission.

Sabina

For the enslaved woman Sabina and her family, manumission was certainly not the end of their relationship with their (former) master and his family. Civil court documents from the 1760s and 1770s recount in some detail the life that Sabina and her family were manumitted into. They give insight into the nature of the changed relationship between master and slave following manumission, the role of debt in bondage and freedom, and the very real threat of re-enslavement.

The legal proceedings in which Sabina’s story has been recorded were precipitated by a dramatic turn of events: in 1769, a widow halted the wedding of a man named Christoffel. Christoffel was Sabina’s son, and the widow claimed to be the lawful owner of Sabina, Christoffel, and her other children. When asked by the court to explain her actions, the widow’s response was recorded as follows:

Not only because the *insinuante* [Sabina] and her three children are still in slavery to the first *g’insinuerde* [the widow], but also because in order for the *insinuante* to enjoy her and her children’s freedom she must pay and satisfy the sum of seventy five and a half rixdollars and the interest thereupon to the first *g’insinuerde* as widow and heiress of Gabriel Kasi Chitty.⁶⁰

Sabina argued against the widow’s allegations, telling the court that she had paid her debt to the widow in full.⁶¹ Sabina’s and her children’s status as freed people or enslaved was at stake. For Sabina and her family, debt was central to the precariousness of their freed status.

Sabina's story began in 1749 when she was manumitted along with her husband and two children. In a deed dated September 6, 1749, slave-owner Simon Casie manumitted Anthonij, Sabina, Christoffel, and Malleappa on receipt of 150 rds. The deed is not clear on who supplied the sum of money; manumission may have come by self-purchase or by drawing on the assistance of free people in the city. Two men, Bastiaan Wannappa and Joan Fernando Arnazelen, both denoted as Chitty in the deed, took on the financial responsibility of guarantors.⁶² Once freed, the former slaves entered into a series of relationships of debt with the former slave-owning family. The court records show that the inability of Sabina's husband to repay the debt led to Sabina and her children's re-enslavement.

Sabina recounted to the court that her husband pawned her "free letter" (*vrijbrief*) to a man named Arnazelen, for a hundred rds.⁶³ It is surely significant that Arnazelen was one of the two guarantors stated on Sabina's manumission deed. But the court records do not give any insight into the nature of the relationship between Arnazelen, Sabina's husband, and Sabina herself. Sabina's family was not able to repay the debt themselves, and, having been ordered by the court to pay Arnazelen's widow the sum of a hundred rds. plus interest, the family turned to Adriaan Casie to request his help. Sabina had a preexisting relationship with Adriaan because he was the son of her former owner, Simon Rodrigo. Adriaan Casie advanced Sabina the money required to satisfy the debt, with the agreement that if she could not pay him back, he would take her and her children on as his slaves. Thus, Adriaan Casie came into possession of the *vrijbrief*.⁶⁴ In his turn, Adriaan pawned the deed to his brother Gabriel Casie.⁶⁵ Thus, a complicated web of debt and obligation had been spun around Sabina, the basis of which was the *vrijbrief* she was granted in 1749, and she herself was the collateral.

As had happened previously, Sabina was in no position to repay the debt to Gabriel Casie when it was called in. He submitted a request to the Council of Justice in October 1759 in which he asked the court to annul Sabina's *vrijbrief*. He explained that she could not repay her debt and had herself asked for her slave papers to be drawn up. The court agreed that the two parties should appear in court, which they did in November 1759. Sabina told the court that she could not repay the debt and so was willing to be made Gabriel Casie's slave.⁶⁶ The civil roll recorded the court's decision to grant Gabriel Casie his request.⁶⁷

The Council of Justice condemned Sabina and her three children into slavery. (Anthonij was deceased by this time, but Sabina had had another child, a son, Joan, who was then enslaved by order of the court.) This was put into effect by annulling the *vrijbrief* that the family had received in 1749. On November 12, 1759, their freed status was officially retracted. A note was added in the margin of the original manumission deed stating that their "freedom was revoked and [they were] ordered to serve Gabriel Casie as slaves."⁶⁸ This radically altered Sabina and her children's legal status, if not their lived experience.

The Council of Justice was not the only Dutch institution that was used in the process of re-enslaving the family. In order to have legal proof of ownership, Gabriel Casie approached the Council of Policy, to have the paperwork drawn up. He proved to the council that, on the basis of the court's ruling, he had full rights of ownership over Sabina and her children Christoffel, Malleappa, and Joan. The council recognized these rights on January 27, 1760.⁶⁹

The documents that attest to Sabina's manumission by purchase, the subsequent web of debt, and then re-enslavement by court order were copied into the Council of Justice's civil roll in 1764 because of a dispute between Sabina and her new owner's widow. From a request that Sabina presented to court in May of that year, it is clear that Sabina hoped to regain her status as a freed woman. It seems that while he was alive, her husband Anthonij had begun to pay off the debt by selling property. Sabina pleaded with the court that she be given her *vrijbrief* if she could pay the remainder of the hundred rds. that she apparently owed to the widow.⁷⁰ It is not clear from the records if this was based on the original sum of 150 rds. that purchased her manumitted status in 1749 or if this was a new agreement between her and Gabriel Casie. Following Sabina's request in 1764, the interim fiscal of Colombo, *Meester* Pieter Blankert, investigated the matter.⁷¹ Later court records attest to the outcome of that investigation: Sabina and her children could enjoy their freed status when Sabina repaid the remainder of her debt to Gabriel Casie's widow.⁷²

Five years later, the court heard the dispute between Sabina and the widow precipitated by the drama of Christoffel's interrupted wedding. For her part, Sabina claimed that the widow's allegations were unjustified and had resulted in "dishonor and shame."⁷³ Sabina claimed that she had repaid the widow in full in the weeks after Blankert's investigation—that is, in 1764. Thereafter, she had been able to afford her own upkeep and had not had interference or assistance from anyone.⁷⁴ Sabina was vindicated by the fiscal's conclusion: he concluded that the widow had stopped the wedding maliciously and that she should compensate Sabina the sum of 161 rds. (wedding costs), as well as pay a fine to the church deacons and cover the costs of the court case. The fiscal recommended this sentence in his *eijsch en conclusie* dated August 30, 1769.⁷⁵ This was clearly a victory for Sabina and her family. However, the case dragged on into 1770 as the widow was unwilling to appear before the court.⁷⁶

Interestingly, the fiscal's conclusion in the civil case in 1769 did not address directly the matter of Sabina's and her children's status as slave or freed. But it is reasonable to infer that in assessing the widow's obstruction of the wedding as malicious and awarding Sabina the financial compensation she claimed, the court recognized her freed status and was confident that she had indeed repaid the debt that covered her second manumission. In Sabina's story, we not only see the long-lasting relationship of debt between the freed slave and former slave-owning family but also that it was debt that threatened her freed status and led to her re-enslavement.

Sabina's case highlights the role of Dutch institutions in governing slavery and manumission. The Dutch institutions in Colombo were central to Sabina's manumission and its revocation: manumission was a formal, legal process; its revocation was established by the court and the paperwork drawn up in the Council of Policy. In addition, the civil dispute between Sabina and the widow played out in the Court of Justice, as did Sabina's attendant damages claim for the cost of the obstructed wedding. None of the men and women making use of the institutions in this particular case were Dutch. The slave-owners who appeared in the court were denoted by the court as Chitty. The fact that the opponents in this dispute were both women should also be pointed out. The widow of Gabriel Casie not only held up the wedding with her allegations but also made use of the court to set out her claims. Perhaps more surprising is the

access to the court that Sabina enjoyed, especially considering that her status before the law was disputed.⁷⁷

Helena

A woman named Helena made similar use of the Colombo court when her legal status as freed or slave was disputed. Alicia Schrikker has recounted the story: Helena claimed that “a certain chetty” had appropriated her as his slave on the grounds that she and her mother had served his family in the past.”⁷⁸ Helena showed an awareness of the legal opportunities presented by Dutch institutions, even claiming that she would appeal the Colombo court’s verdict in the Council of Justice in Batavia. Unfortunately, the outcome of the case has been lost. But what the records do show, according to Schrikker, is that “in practice, the distinction between bondage and freedom was not entirely clear-cut.”⁷⁹ The result, Schrikker concludes, was that “places like Colombo will have included groups of semi-bonded persons [like Helena] who are otherwise invisible to us.”⁸⁰

Conclusions

Growth in the field of Indian Ocean slavery studies has given impetus to research on slavery and the slave trade in VOC ports and settlements across the VOC charter area. Yet, in comparison to other areas of the VOC world, slavery in Sri Lanka remains understudied. This article has delved into the issue of manumission in order to highlight pertinent issues of both bondage and freed status in the VOC port city. Much research remains to be done in this area.

Manumission in eighteenth-century Colombo brought about a change in legal status—from slave to freed. This change was achieved by more female than male enslaved people, but the constraints of the archive—namely, lack of population data—make the frequency of manumission, or the manumission rate, impossible to calculate. Furthermore, silences surround the enslaved persons named in deeds; few details of age, occupation, skill, background, or experience can be traced in the archival record. Yet, the deeds do give insight into the reasons for manumission. Specifically, the deeds attest to the fact that not only was manumission by (self-)purchase an option for enslaved people in Colombo, it was a reality for almost 40 percent of the individuals manumitted in the period 1750–52. That proportion fell dramatically, to under 10 percent, in the later part of the eighteenth century. Manumission by purchase was far less likely at the end of the century than it had been previously.

Manumission by purchase necessitates a consideration of the agency and social strategies of the enslaved who were freed. The deeds do not specify who provided the sum to the slave-owner, but it is not unlikely that the enslaved themselves paid for their manumission or mobilized their networks of kin and contacts to provide the sum, as the free black population did at the Cape. Recognizing the agency of the enslaved in the process of manumission shifts the focus away from the role of the slave master and situates manumission as a negotiated process between master and slave.

Manumission did not end the master-slave relationship. VOC law held slaves to certain conditions—namely, showing deference and providing

assistance to the former slave-owning family. These conditions had their roots in the Roman law *obsequium*. Moreover, enslaved individuals in Colombo were increasingly manumitted under added conditions—namely, continued labor for the slave-owning family. In the late eighteenth century, 20 percent of manumitted individuals were held to added conditions. For them, freed status likely brought little change in their lived experience; they continued to be legally obliged to perform labor for their former master.

The Colombo Council of Justice was the VOC institution that administered manumission, and it was to this institution that individuals turned to defend their freedom. In light of the problematic nature of the term “freedom” in the Indian Ocean world, it is better to consider Sabina’s and Helena’s legal actions as defenses of their freed status. Each woman had awareness and knowledge of the VOC Court and made use of the institution to pursue her own ends. In Sabina’s case, that included a compensation claim for costs of the interrupted wedding, amounting to a sum greater than that which first purchased her manumission in 1749.

As Gwyn Campbell and Edward Alpers noted, “an important part of the challenge for historians of slavery and unfree labor is that received [Atlantic] distinctions between ‘slave’ and ‘free’ are not particularly helpful tools of historical analysis in most regions of IOA [Indian Ocean Africa] and Asia.”⁸¹ This is certainly the case when we put manumission in VOC Colombo under the spotlight. Under the VOC, in which there was legal provision to manumit slaves, manumission was not simply an exit from slavery into a life of freedom. Manumission brought a changed but continuing relationship with the former master. These conditions constrained freed people’s “freedom” and colored gradations of bondage and dependency.

For all manumitted individuals—but especially for those who were manumitted conditionally, like Thomas, or manumitted into a life of debt, like Sabina—freed status was precarious. Manumission could be revoked by the Council of Justice as it was for Thomas and Sabina, and in some instances, freed status had to be defended in court against allegations, as Sabina’s and Helena’s stories revealed. The records show that manumitted status was precarious and, like bondage, was not an unalterable state.

Endnotes

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1. This historiography is discussed in Marc Kleijwegt, “Freedpeople: A Brief Cross-Cultural History,” in *The Faces of Freedom: The Manumission and Emancipation of Slaves in Old World and New World Slavery*, ed. Marc Kleijwegt (Boston, 2006), 17.

2. On nineteenth-century Zanzibar, see Thomas F. McDow, "Deeds of Freed Slaves: Manumission and Economic and Social Mobility in Pre-abolition Zanzibar," in *Indian Ocean Slavery in the Age of Abolition*, ed. Robert W. Harms, Bernard K. Freamon, and David W. Blight (New Haven, CT, 2013). On the Atlantic side, see Linda Rupert, "Marronage, Manumission and Maritime Trade in the Early Modern Caribbean," *Slavery & Abolition* 30, no. 3 (2009): 361; Karwan Fatah-Black's current NWO-Veni project, "Paths through Slavery," about manumission and freedom in Suriname, and Paulina Alberto, "*Liberta* by Trade: Negotiating the Terms of Unfree Labor in Gradual Abolition Buenos Aires," *Journal of Social History* 52, no. 3 (2019): 619–51.
3. James Watson, ed., *Asian and African Systems of Slavery* (Berkeley, CA, 1980); Gwyn Campbell, "Introduction: Slavery and Other Forms of Unfree Labour in the Indian Ocean World," in *The Structure of Slavery in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia*, ed. Gwyn Campbell (London, 2004); Gwyn Campbell and Edward A. Alpers, "Introduction: Slavery, Forced Labour and Resistance in Indian Ocean Africa and Asia," *Slavery & Abolition* 25, no. 2 (2004). In this vein, Anthony Reid highlights "vertical bonding" in Anthony Reid, "Introduction: Slavery and Bondage in Southeast Asian History," in *Slavery, Bondage and Dependency in Southeast Asia*, ed. Anthony Reid and Jennifer Brewster (New York, 1983).
4. Campbell and Alpers, "Introduction: Slavery, Forced Labour and Resistance," ix–x.
5. Campbell and Alpers, "Introduction: Slavery, Forced Labour and Resistance," x.
6. For instance, Richard Allen, "Lives of Neither Luxury nor Misery: Indians and Free Colored Marginality on the Ile de France (1728–1810)," *Revue française d'histoire d'outre-mer* 78, no. 292 (1991).
7. Richard B. Allen, *European Slave Trading in the Indian Ocean, 1500–1850* (Athens, OH, 2014), chap. 6.
8. Remco Raben, "Batavia and Colombo: The Ethnic and Spatial Order of Two Colonial Cities, 1600–1800," (PhD diss., Leiden University, 1996), 119, 30–31. Ordinances regarding the Portuguese and their property, including their slaves, were published in Colombo soon after conquest. See Lodewijk Hovy, *Ceylonees Plakkaatboek: Plakkaten En Andere Wetten Uitgevaardigd Door Het Nederlandse Bestuur Op Ceylon, 1638–1796*, 2 vols. (Hilversum, Netherlands, 1991), I: 23–4.
9. Kate J. Ekama, "Slavery in Dutch Colombo" (master's thesis, Leiden University, 2012), esp. chap. 1.
10. Raben, "Batavia and Colombo," 100, 103–16.
11. Markus Vink, "'The World's Oldest Trade': Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of World History* 14, no. 2 (2003). For more detail on slave origins, see Ekama, "Slavery in Dutch Colombo," chap. 1. On the origins of enslaved people at the Cape, see Nigel Worden, "Indian Ocean Slaves in Cape Town, 1695–1807," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 42, no. 3 (2016).
12. Kerry Ward, *Networks of Empire: Forced Migration in the Dutch East India Company* (New York, 2009).
13. The Juriaanse guide to the Dutch records in the SLNA presents the structure of the archive and gives helpful explanations of the types of documents found in different sections.
14. For example, SLNA 1/4146, February 25, 1779 [Jean Brohier; Joseph/Philip].

15. It is worth remarking that the payment went to the church, not straight into the company coffers. This may have been seen as a contribution to taking care of the poor, potentially including freed slaves, which charity was dispensed by the church.

16. On manumission at the Cape, see Robert Shell, *Children of Bondage: A Social History of the Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (Hanover, NH, 1994), 384–85. The pattern holds for manumission in other times and places too, for instance in Île de France/Mauritius, where twice as many women as men were manumitted in the late eighteenth century. See Allen, “Lives of Neither Luxury nor Misery,” 351. In nineteenth century Zanzibar, manumissions numbered in the thousands but constituted a low proportion of the enslaved population. Of those manumitted, more than 50 percent were women. Abdul Sheriff et al., *Transition from Slavery in Zanzibar and Mauritius* (Dakar, Senegal, 2016), 39.

17. SLNA 1/4146, November 19, 1794 [Johan Gerard van Angelbeek; Alida, Bintang, Kassim, and Patra].

18. There are no known extant population data for the eighteenth century, as was also noted by Raben. He discusses late seventeenth-century population figures, as does Knaap. See Raben, “Batavia and Colombo,” 103–16; Gerrit Knaap, “Europeans, Mestizos and Slaves: The Population of Colombo at the End of the Seventeenth Century,” *Itinerario* 5, no. 2 (1981).

19. There is very little research on manumission in VOC settlements, including Batavia. This is certainly an avenue of research that can and should be pursued in future.

20. Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 384.

21. Nigel Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (Cambridge, 1985), chap. 5.

22. Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 384. Elbourne points out that a key difference in male and female enslavement was exactly this issue of reproduction, in which much of the “value” of enslaved women resided from the point of view of the owner. Elizabeth Elbourne, “Introduction: Key Themes and Perspectives,” in *Sex, Power, and Slavery*, ed. Gwyn Campbell and Elizabeth Elbourne (Athens, OH, 2014), 21.

23. Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 384, quote 386.

24. Knaap, “Europeans, Mestizos and Slaves,” 96.

25. SLNA 1/4145, August 6, 1738 [Frans Gomes; Rosetta, Louisa, Agida and Elisabeth], ff. 5r–v.

26. Elbourne, “Introduction,” 6. See Mariana Candido’s contribution in the same volume for how women in Benguela used sexual relations with European men to advance their own interests on the coast.

27. On “self-ownership” and various obligations to provide men with sex, see Elbourne, “Introduction,” 17.

28. Similarly, in Île de France, French law allowed for manumission by self-purchase, by a will, or as a reward from the owner. Interestingly, exchange was not noted as a route out of slavery. Sheriff et al., *Transition from Slavery*, 30. In Zanzibar, manumission was shaped at least in part by Islam: according to the Qur’an, slave owners should write “contracts of emancipation” for slaves who asked for them, and manumitting a slave was considered a pious act, as McDow points out. McDow, “Deeds of Freed Slaves,” 163.

29. Kleijwegt, “Freedpeople,” 26.

30. Conversely, the death penalty was promised for a slave who physically attacked his master. Statute of Batavia in Jacob Anne van der Chijs, ed., *Nederlandsch-Indisch*

Plakaatboek, vol. 1 (1602–1642), (Batavia [Jakarta], 1885), 573, 575. Manumission was not only offered as a reward within the household. Following the murder of Cape inhabitant Hendrik Breemeyer in 1790, the company authorities offered manumission as a reward for an enslaved person who assisted in bringing the murderer to justice. From the authorities' point of view, such an offer was surely intended to entice enslaved people to be informants, rather than protect a fellow enslaved person who had been involved in the crime. A free person who helped to find the murderer was offered a monetary reward. S. Naudé and P. J. Venter, eds., *Kaapse Plakkaatboek*, vol. IV (Cape Town, 1949), "Beloning vir die uitlewering van een moordenaar" (April 13/22, 1790), 28.

31. Campbell and Alpers, "Introduction: Slavery, Forced Labour and Resistance," xvi.
32. Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 380–81, 94. Paulina Alberto's recent article discusses the various ways in which masters constrained enslaved people's self-purchase opportunities in early nineteenth-century Argentina. Alberto, "Liberta by Trade," 632.
33. It was certainly not a right for the enslaved in Suriname. Thanks to Karwan Fatah-Black for pointing this out. Manumission by purchase became a right at the Cape during the British period: Ordinance 19 (1826) permitted the enslaved to purchase freedom with or without the consent of their master. See John Edwin Mason, *Social Death and Resurrection: Slavery and Emancipation in South Africa* (Charlottesville, VA, 2003), 49–50.
34. SLNA 1/4146, February 20, 1786 [Manuel Adam Fernando; Kastoerie and Thomasie].
35. Colombo: SLNA 1/4675. On the Cape, see Robert Ross, "The Occupations of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Cape Town," *Studies in the History of Cape Town* 2 (1980): 10–11.
36. SLNA 1/2663, Johanna Petronella Schade, March 30, 1776, f. 59r.
37. See discussion of the term and its definition in Susan Newton-King, "Family, Friendship and Survival among Freed Slaves," in *Cape Town between East and West: Social Identities in a Dutch Colonial Town*, ed. Nigel Worden (Sunnyside, South Africa, 2012), 154, 243n8.
38. Shell discussed in Newton-King, "Family, Friendship and Survival," 154. and Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 389.
39. SLNA 1/4146 unpaginated.
40. SLNA 1/4146, January 5, 1791, [Adriana Elisabeth Luders; Cardoes]; September 5, 1779 [Philippus Matteus Trekels; Achilles].
41. SLNA 1/4146, August 6, 1783 [Anthonij van Baale; Matra]; November 26, 1792 [Salomon Fernando; Susanna]; April 17, 1787 [Cadieraaman; Lechumannel]; February 20, 1786 [Adam Fernando; Kastoerie and Thomasie]; December 9, 1786 [Assuerus Issendorp; Anna Cleopatra and Clarisa]; May 24, 1787 [Wilhelmina Cornelia Groegorius; Lea]; September 9, 1787 [Adriana Koersse; Amaris].
42. SLNA 1/4146, March 22, 1786 [Wilhelmina Elisabeth Schreuder; Tipa].
43. SLNA 1/4145, January 13, 1751 [Domenicus Danielsz van den Bosch; Kito], ff. 337v–338r.
44. SLNA 1/4145, March 16, 1739, ff. 18r–19r.
45. Newton-King, "Family, Friendship and Survival," 156.
46. Newton-King, "Family, Friendship and Survival," 158.
47. Worden, *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, 63.

48. By tracing the names of guarantors in the manumission deeds, Schrikker and Ekama have suggested that slaves had ample connections in Colombo, which were significant to their lives in bondage as well as in freedom. Alicia Schrikker and Kate Ekama, "Through the Lens of Slavery: Dutch Sri Lanka in the Eighteenth Century," in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*, ed. Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (London, 2018), 182–83.

49. Statutes of Batavia discussed in Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 377.

50. Henk Niemeijer gives the example of a Balinese Batavian named Ipti Lawang, who manumitted two of his slaves on condition they serve his wife for another year. Hendrik Niemeijer, "The Free Asian Christian Community and Poverty in Pre-modern Batavia," in *Jakarta-Batavia: Socio-Cultural Essays*, ed. Kees Grijns and Peter Nas (Leiden, Netherlands, 2000), 81.

51. SLNA 1/4146, February 25, 1779 [Jean Brohier; Joseph/Philip].

52. SLNA 1/4146, November 15, 1780 [Maria Agnitha Bierens; Klarinda, Elisabeth, and Sara]. Numerous examples of conditional freedom exist in volumes of manumission deeds and wills.

53. SLNA 1/4145; 4146. For the period 1750–52, the small sample size makes similar calculations problematic. In that period, out of eighty-one individuals who were manumitted, eight were required to provide continued labour, including four enslaved men or boys, three women or girls, and one individual of unknown gender.

54. Allen, *European Slave Trading*, chap. 6 discusses the development of abolitionist ideas and early policies across British and East India Company possessions.

55. Shell, *Children of Bondage*, 378.

56. On free and unfree labor and the debate around these concepts in global labor history, see M. van Rossum, *Werkers Van De Wereld: Globalisering, Arbeid En Interculturele Ontmoetingen Tussen Aziatische En Europese Zeelieden in Dienst van de VOC, 1600–1800* (Hilversum, Netherlands, 2014), 209–11.

57. SLNA 1/4145, October 12, 1751 [Saviel Britoe Fernando; Magdalena], ff. 354r–55r.

58. Boudewijn Sirks and Jan Hallebeek, "Uit Het Archief Van De Raad Van Justitie Te Colombo: Rechtsbedeling in Ceylon in De 18e Eeuw," *Fundamina* 16, no. 1 (2010): 392–98.

59. SLNA 1/4146, February 25, 1794 [crossed out].

60. SLNA 1/4339 18r–v. Original: "Dat de g'insinueerdens het huwelijk van de insinuante zoon Christoffel Malleappa hebben belet is niet alleen omdat de insinuante en haere drie kinderen nog in slavernij van de eerste g'insinueerde zijn, maer ook om dat de insinuante tot het jouisseeren van haer en haer kinderen vrijdom aen de eerste g'insinueerde als wed.e en boedelhoudster van Gabriel Kasie Chittij nog deugdelijk uitkeeren en voldaan moet de somma van vijf en seventig en een halve rds. met dies verloperne interest."

61. SLNA 1/4339 ff. 2v–3v.

62. SLNA 1/4337 ff. 11r–12r. Chitty, Chetty, or in some records Sitty is a reference to the Chettiar caste.

63. SLNA 1/4337 f. 7v. Pawning a *vrijbrief* was not unheard of in the VOC world: according to Henk Niemeijer, freed women in Batavia could pawn their *vrijbrieven* for sixty rds. and had the opportunity to buy it back at a later point in time. Niemeijer, "The Free Asian Christian Community," 84.

64. SLNA 1/4337 ff. 1v–2r; 7r–8r.
65. SLNA 1/4337 f. 8r.
66. SLNA 1/4337 ff. 2r–3v. Original: “Den gereq. zegt niet in staat te zijn om het geld optebrenge, en daarom genegen te zijn, om dienstbaar te worden.”
67. SLNA 1/4337 f. 3v.
68. SLNA 1/4337 11r–12r. Manumission deed copied into the civil case dossier. Original: “vrijdom weder ingetrokken en geordonneert als slaven te dienen Gabriel Casie Chitty.”
69. SLNA 1/4337 f. 5r.
70. SLNA 1/4337 ff. 7r–9r.
71. SLNA 1/4337 ff. 9r–v.
72. SLNA 1/4339 ff. 2r–3r.
73. SLNA 1/4339 f. 10r. Original: “tort en schande.”
74. SLNA 1/4339 ff. 2v–3v.
75. SLNA 1/4339 ff. 5r–v. It is worth noting that the compensation sum was greater than the sum paid for Sabina’s and her children’s manumission in 1749.
76. SLNA 1/4340.
77. On uses and users of justice in the VOC legal framework, see Alicia Schrikker and Dries Lyna, “Threads of the Legal Web: Dutch Law and Everyday Colonialism in Eighteenth-Century Asia,” in *The Uses of Justice in Global Perspective, 1600–1900*, ed. Manon van der Heijden, Griet Vermeesch, and Jaco Zuijderduijn (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK, 2019), 42–56.
78. Alicia F. Schrikker, “Conflict Resolution, Social Control and Law-Making in Eighteenth-Century Dutch Sri Lanka,” in *Exploring the Dutch Empire: Agents, Networks and Institutions, 1600–2000*, ed. Catia Antunes and Jos Gommans (London, 2015), 227. See Schrikker and Ekama, “Through the Lens of Slavery,” for discussion of enslaved individuals’ local connections as well as awareness of, possibly even sense of belonging to, networks beyond the island.
79. Schrikker, “Conflict Resolution,” 239.
80. Schrikker, “Conflict Resolution,” 239.
81. Campbell and Alpers, “Introduction: Slavery, Forced Labour and Resistance,” ix.