

British Policy towards the Kandyan Law: (Changes to the Traditional Law during the Period, from 1815 to 1833)

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After several unsuccessful attempts during the first decade of the 19th century, the British conquered the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815 (see, de Silva, 1953). As a result of this change of government, the administrative system of the Kandyan Provinces was subjected to changes, some of which were quite apparent while others were subtle in nature. However, these changes were not direct challenges to the existing administrative system in that area (see, Kulasekera, 1984). This was evident, particularly during the first fifteen or twenty years after the capture of power. Although some drastic measures were taken after the rebellion of 1818, the basic administrative structure was kept intact as much as possible. This was due to the fact that the British were vigilant over the risk of an indigenous resistance, and they were very much aware that a simple lapse from their part would surely ignite such resistance (de Silva, 1953, p. 168).

Law and the administration of justice were vital aspects of the administrative system of the Kandyans. Here, what is meant by the law is the traditional customary law of the Kandyans which was popularly known as the 'Kandyan Law'. This law has become a major component of the British administrative system of the Kandyan Provinces after 1815. The objective of this article is to examine the nature of the changes brought about to the law by the British during the first fifteen years of their rule of the Kandyan Provinces.¹

As mentioned before, the Kandyan Law played a vital role in the administration of the Kandyan Kingdom until 1815. This law in most aspects was a continuation of traditional principles of law. Thus, some of the provisions in the Kandyan Law had their roots in the past legal systems and laws of the country, while some other principles of law were most likely to have originated in the socio-cultural and economic context of the 'Kandyan