

# HOW SOCIETIES REMEMBER: NOTES AND QUERIES ON THE (AB) USE OF HISTORY IN SRI LANKA

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"Tacitus did not see the crucifixion though his book recorded it. The Unicorn because of its anomaly will pass unnoticed."

Jorge Luis Borges in *Other Inquisitions*.

Depending on how one sees it, Sri Lanka is blessed or cursed with an excess of history today. Present historical excesses take many forms: from mythologies about the traditional unity of Tamil Homelands in the North and East, to the presumed unity of Sinhala-Buddhist national identity since the third century, to attempts to debunk or otherwise analyze such stories in historicist terms.

Recently, after the merciful respite that followed a proliferation of election-inspired historical fantasies, our national history fetish was again the subject of mild dispute: this time, in the form of a potted history which purported to give historical reason (and arguably further cause) for our current ethnic misery. The text I have in mind was published on the pretext of reviewing historian Kingsley de Silva's appraisal of "Separatist Ideology in Sri Lanka: the 'Traditional Homelands' of the Tamils", which set out to debunk the LTTE ideologues' claims about the unity of the north and east in the Tamil past. Gunadasa Amarasekera's review of de Silva's essay, published in the *Island* of November 8, 1993 consisted of a potpourri of facts and effects.

What was clear from the style of presentation of both historical discourses—De Silva's essay on the Tamil Homelands Myth and Amarasekera's discussion of De Silva's book—is that our present penchant for history blurs the line between popular and specialist history. It also transcends the ethnic divide. In fact, it is at the interface between popular and academic debate that the question as to whether Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhalese or the Tamils draws the most passionate, fantastic and revealing histories of the island's past. These stories treat as self-evident the assumption that history (and the further back it goes, the better) might shore up the exclusive claims of particular ethnic groups to territory in the present.

## The Excess of Sinhala History

The present surfeit of history in Sri Lanka is only partly explained historically. It is often claimed that unlike the majority of once colonized and diversely peopled islands the world over which had to invent pre-colonial pasts

in the absence of literacy, let alone history, Sri Lanka was spared the embarrassment of having to invent its national past. While islands like Hawaii, Fiji or Malagasy which are still commonly thought to have been inhabited by "people without history" (read civilization), prior to the arrival of the Europeans with their linear, historical modes of time measurement and tabulation, Sri Lanka, or to be precise the Sinhala, it is said, had a solid gold history. That is, the Pali vamsas—principally the *Mahavamsa* which provides a more or less chronological if broken narrative of particular royal courts and lineages and their relationship to particular sects of the Buddhist Sangha in Sri Lanka.

The chronologicity of the *Mahavamsa*, after the discovery of the *Vamsattaparakasani* (the text used to decode it) rendered it unique among the literary narratives of South Asia. Thus it came to be used by nineteenth-century European orientalists as the prime source for constructing, not only, the history of Sri Lanka but also that of the sub-continent, at least until the decoding of the Asokan inscriptions in India. For, faced with having to construct a scientific and evolutionary story of South Asian civilization, nineteenth-century European Orientalists awarded Sri Lanka the gift of historical memory over its giant neighbour India, which lacked a continuous and identifiable historical tradition. The *Mahavamsa* or history was presumed to speak the totality of the Sri Lankan and Indian past. In the process the presence of numerous other ethno-religious, linguistic and cultural groups in the country were erased from the historical memory. Sri Lanka came to be equated with the evolution of Sinhala-Buddhist identity.

The European orientalist legacy of reading of the *Mahavamsa* as a more or less true representation of past events in Sri Lanka, i.e. as History with a capital H, is still with us. Ironically, this reading of the Sinhala past, seems to have found its firmest believers among the *Jathika Chinthanaya* pop historians who under most circumstances are the first to eschew all western influences. Oblivious to the fact that positivist history has served to invent the antiquity of modern nation-states, and has legitimated racism and colonialism, Gunadasa Amarasekera insists on perpetuating the same type of ethnocentric oppressive history of Sri Lanka. For him the history of the country is the history of the Sinhala and

their assimilation of all other peoples, cultures, religions that have become part of our landscape. The diversity of histories that might be told of a single land, particularly the places of coastal Sri Lanka with their rich ethnic, religious and linguistic communities, is elided.

The vamsas have been read as a totalizing and more or less accurate window into the past, rather than being viewed as themselves historically produced, partial and interested in order to persuade and/or polemise against other powerful and literate audiences. The Mahavamsa even if it might be called history is certainly not a document which is unbiased, objective and accurate. Be that as it may, the *Mahavamsa* still renders Sri Lanka singular among the world's post-colonial island nations. Perhaps, this singularity, this burden of history, provides the answer to our post-colonial historical excesses.

## The Excess of Tamil History

**B**ut if the proliferation of ethno-centric history in Sri Lanka was due to the Pali-Vamsas, what of the Sri Lankan Tamils' historical excesses? Do the Tamil nationalists have Sinhala history-envy?

It is indeed arguable that Tamil nationalist historians have been reacting to Sinhala nationalists, that history like identity is dialectically produced. In countering the Mahavamsa story that posits the original unity of the Sinhala-Buddhist nation with the opening account of the three visits of the Thathagatha, Tamil nationalists have rather unimaginatively followed precisely the Sinhala pattern and structure of using history to buttress claims to territory, for example, the claim that the *Mahavamsa* provides evidence of an older or prior Sinhala claim to the country, that there was always a unified Sinhala nation in the island, etc. (What parenthetically of the Vannialatto, better known as the Veddas who according to standard interpretations of the *Mahavamsa* are descendants of the *Yakas* and *Nagas*, to the ownership and lordship over the country as its ORIGINAL inhabitants?)

## The Politics of History

**W**hile Tamil nationalists' history-envy might be the reason for the Homelands mytho-history, there seems to be a more interesting and finally more telling reason for the recent proliferation of nationalist histories. Mr. Amarasekera himself kindly directs us to this reason, when he queries the reasons for the manufacture and survival of the Tamil Homelands myth and states: "I believe we have to go beyond history and examine the political, economic and social structure of this country..".

What Mr. Amarasekera who applauds de Silva's debunking of "The Myth of the Tamil Homelands" for its scholarship, seems to not notice is that his and De Silva's point about Tamil history are also applicable to Sinhala mythohistories: that it is not only Tamil nationalists who are engaged quite cynically in remaking the past to suit present politics and contingencies. After all, the *Yakhas* and *Nagas*, and the other semi-human

creatures who inhabit the *Mahavamsa* are at least as mythological as Tamil nationalist histories. Yet according to him Tamil history is closer than the *Mahavamsa* stories to myth.

*Jathika Chinthanaya* and LTTE fictions alike illustrate how history might be and has been used for present political ends. The contemporary surfeit of history in Sri Lanka has less to do with the richness of Sri Lanka's historical record than with present-day politics. This is not, of course, to deny the singularity of the Vamsa myth-histories, but to displace their hegemony in the production of national historical memory.

The production and multiplication of histories in contemporary Sri Lanka is not singular. Rather it is an aspect of the process of nation building, of selective remembrance that enables what Benedict Anderson has termed the "imagined community" of the modern nation. History as most of us know it today, i.e. as national history is *par excellence* the narrative of the modern nation and hence always necessarily a political project. And this is true of ethno-centric histories espoused by ethnic nationalists as well as the subtler erasures and absences contained in recognizably scholarly histories and historical disagreements. That history is the favourite pasttime of nationalists involved in inventing the antiquity of recognizably modern nations, including Sri Lanka reveals the constitutive orders of modern forms of historical memory and nationalism.

## Cultural Minorities and Hi-Story Today

**W**hile the modern European tradition of past as the story of the role of great white men in the making of the nation-state has been increasingly contested in the Euro-American world where debates over the teaching of national history have reached near "civil war proportions among historians" and resulted in the revision of school history text books so that they incorporate the histories of women, immigrants, and cultural and ethnic minorities, Sri Lankan history particularly primary and secondary school history texts remains steeped in nationalist mytho-histories. At the same time amidst the proliferation of nationalist histories there seems to be a singular silence. Leftist historians with a few notable exceptions have all but abandoned the fight for history at least at the popular level to the nationalists.

Thus the dominant issues of history still pertain to simplistic distinctions between myth and history as if history were fact without interpretation. Thus much of the history debate in Sri Lanka has been about whose history is real History as opposed to myth or fantasy. Both De Silva and Amarasekera have sought to make a clear distinction between history and myth. Yet as Raymond Williams in his instructive etymology of the word "history" in the English language has pointed out:

"In early English usage history and story (the alternative English form derived ultimately from the same root) were applied to an account either of imaginary events or of events supposed to be true". (keywords)

That history has always had an element of myth, and myth an element of history which makes for their different narrative efficacy is an aspect of history and myth (read fact and interpretation) that those who view them as binary oppositions have forgotten.

The fact that there are no simple distinctions to be made between history, story and myth is arguably one of the reasons that specialists of history are hardly agreed about anything, beginning with the historical reasons for our present ethnic conflict. Yet, that practitioners of history seem evenly divided about how to explain our post-colonial ethnic debacle (whether

in terms of the historical animosity between the Sinhala and Tamil, or British *divide et impera*) is not so much cause to despair at history, as cause for recognizing the limits of history, what Borges calls the "modesty of history". More importantly, it makes clear the fact that history cannot and does not in the final analysis provide solutions for present conflicts. What after all, is the relevance of ten centuries of Tamil homelands or the unity of Sinhala-Buddhist identity since the third-century (even if it were true), to finding a solution to the current crisis when such histories have provided fodder for ethnic violence? ■

## FAMILY HISTORIES AS POST-COLONIAL TEXTS

Yasmine Gooneratne

The word 'Australia' summoned up in my mind a single picture, one which I instantly recognised as having come straight out of the *Philip's Atlas* I had used as a schoolboy at Royal. On Philip's map of the world, huge areas of the earth's surface had broken out in the rash of washed-out pink patches which denoted British ownership. To the east of India and the island of Ceylon (also pink), south of Borneo and Sarawak, there Australia had been, a blank pink space shaped like the head of a Scotch terrier with its ears pricked up and its square nose permanently pointed westwards, towards Britain.

That doggy devotion to Britain is something that I, familiar with the colonial traditions of my own family, fully understand the reasons for, even though I do not, of course, personally subscribe to it.

*A Change of Skies*, 1991.

What the principal narrator of my novel calls a 'doggy devotion to Britain' is an imperial legacy that has long survived the end of the Empire itself. It could surface in surprising ways. Falling in love during a colonial adolescence could often be, for example, a quaint and curious thing. Ours being a very conservative society in pre-independence times, a lot of what we thought of as 'love' had its existence entirely in the mind and in the imagination. Most schoolgirls, for instance, collected pictures of their heroes, and stuck them lovingly into albums. A classmate who sat next to me through Junior and most of Senior school took as the objects of her affection most of the members of the British royal family, which meant that her albums were full of photographs of crowns, medals, dress uniforms and corgis. The rest of us had less elevated desires—our dreams were filled by film actors and sportsmen: indeed, one of my classmates fell passionately in love with the entire Australian cricket team, then visiting Colombo on their way to play Test matches at Lords.

At a different level, this peculiarly colonial devotion may be identified in the sentimental affection that made thousands of West Indians answer the Mother Country's postwar call for assistance in running her extensive transport system, and staffed Britain's National Health Service with highly qualified medical personnel drawn from the Commonwealth nations of five continents. In pre-Thatcher times, it ensured that hundreds of university graduates (of my own generation) from Commonwealth countries travelled to Britain—rather than to the USA or to Europe—for their postgraduate education.

The imperial outlook seems to have affected not only the attitude of ex-colonial nations to Britain, but regulated the relationships of their citizens with one another. In an earlier book, *Relative Merits* (1986), an account of the English-educated Bandaranaike family of Sri Lanka, I drew attention to this phenomenon:

Cultivating English modes of living and thinking, the members of my father's clan had imbibed a very proper English prejudice against Jews, 'frogs', 'Chinks', 'niggers', 'Japs', 'Huns', 'fuzzy-wuzzies', 'wops' and 'wogs' of every description. English upper-class scorn of the lower orders in British society was easily translated, in the context of Ceylon, into a whole-hearted contempt for merchants, trades, members of 'inferior' castes, and even of... Sinhalese families such as their own who were not, unlike their own, 'out of the top drawer'. Tamils, Burghers, Parsis and Muslims were, of course, literally breeds apart: acquaintance with them was possible, friendship rare, and marriage unthinkable.

*Relative Merits*, p. 100

It was inevitable, I suppose, given the intensive nature of the English education with which upper-class 'colonials' were endowed by generations of teachers drawn from Britain's