

The Weva, the Dagaba, and the Hotel: History as Commodity

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An alliance of the landlords of the Dambulla Temple, populist sections of the Sinhala press, and a racist faction of a “social-democratic” political party have voiced their opposition to the proposed building of a government approved luxury hotel overlooking the Kandalama Tank near Dambulla by a publicly quoted company. One of the main arguments against the new hotel is one which has been advanced in recent years against other proposed hotels and international tourism in general: tourism corrupts our indigenous culture, claimed to have a history of over two thousand five hundred years. Hotels for international tourists, especially in the vicinity of the ‘ancient’ sites of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya and Dambulla, this argument goes, are nothing but parts of a market that sell our pristine culture to foreigners. Culture here is equated with ‘history’, and ‘history’ has become a commodity: the horror, the horror of it all!

Such opposition to the commodification of culture and history is simple-minded. I argue that ‘ancient’ sites/sights of the ‘*raja rata*’ are really quite new. Anuradhapura and other sites which are now considered to be the material repositories of our ‘history’ emerge, in the forms and with the content we know, only in this age of capital, specifically after the 1830’s. And as these signs of ‘history’ — tanks and dagabas — are products of capital, we should not be surprised to find that the value of these commodities can only be realized after exchange and consumption. In other words, a hotel on the banks of a tank and a tour bus that leaves daily for the ruins are not ‘corrupting foreign influences.’ Rather, they are a necessary moment in the circulation of a commodified ‘history’, which is produced well within the logic of capital. What follows is an abbreviated defence of this argument, where I will take Anuradhapura, the symbolic core of ‘*raja rata*’ as my example.

To grasp the massive rise of the importance of Anuradhapura during the past 150 years, we must realize that this site was not very important to the indigenous kings of the early nineteenth century. For example Prince Muttusami, a British sponsored pretender to the throne of Kandy, agreed to cede a Kandyan province in exchange for British support of his ascension to the throne. The British wanted Sabaragamuwa, which Muttusami refused because it brought substantial revenues and would have led to the loss of Sri Pada, “the sacrilegious cessation of which would bring down on him ‘the wrath of heaven and the curses of mankind’”. The prince, however, was willing to cede the province of Nuwarakalaviya instead.¹ This is, roughly, what is now called

the NCP, and it didn’t worry the prince that he would have lost control of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Dambulla.

Turning to colonial representations of the area surrounding Anuradhapura, we find that even after 1815, when British colonial rule extended to the entire island, Emerson Tennant for instance refers to the area as an “unexplored district” or an “unknown mountainous region.” In this period (1815-1830), it is primarily military officers, in the pursuit of ‘rebels’ or ‘game’, who reach this area. Reports of ‘ruins’ in the interior are duly noted, but don’t warrant more than a footnote or passing reference in many written accounts. This region became important for the colonial project only after the setting up of large coffee plantations in the central hills in the mid 1830’s: large groups of wage labourers needed to be transported from South India to the central hills to work on these plantations. The swiftest route of migration was through this hitherto unordered region to the north of the central hills. The project of ordering land, which had been confined to the areas of 1817-18 rebellion, moved to the Nuwara-Kalawiywa, which later became the ‘North-Central Province.’

This project is simultaneous with the discovery and translation of the textual *Mahavamsa* in the 1830s, which until this point was known only as fluid oral narratives, constituted by a shifting field of social debate.² Even though other texts paralleling the *Mahavamsa* were available, none of them were thought to be ‘historical’ by the colonial Orientalists. In fact, until then the colonial claim was that the pre-colonial texts of all South Asia were, as James Mill put it, “a maze of unnatural fictions.” But after Georges Turnour’s translation, the specific sections of the *Mahavamsa* which do not speak of fantastic miracles, and incalculable time, are read as “rich in authentic facts...presenting a connected history of the island.”³ The crucial point here is that links between the newly translated textual *Mahavamsa* and the Sri Lankan landscape strengthened enormously after this point; since the 1850’s it is as if the text of the *Mahavamsa* were written on the ground.

There are a myriad ways to demonstrate this claim: I will present one example relating to the re-construction of a proper name. The site that we refer to as Anuradhapura is written in different transliterated forms in various colonial accounts. While part of this variation is attributable to the problems inherent in translating an unfamiliar word, I suggest that there is more to it: the two semantic poles that emerged throughout the early nineteenth century accounts were ‘Anurajapura’ and ‘Anuradhapura’. One can see the increasing use of the second term with the growing authority of the *Mahavamsa*. Now in Sinhala, Anurajapura could mean *Anu[wa]*-ninety, *raja*-king, *pura*-city: the city of ninety kings. In the seventeenth century Robert Knox referred to the city

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as a place where ninety kings ruled. The Portuguese historian, Fernao de Queyroz, also writing in the seventeenth century, was even more explicit: he referred to the palace as *Anu Rajapure*, which he translated as the "Mansion of Ninety Kings." By the nineteenth century, however, the authority of the Mahavamsa began to override this semantic construction: we can read this hierarchization in Jonathan Forbes: "It is the general belief of the *uneducated* natives that the name of the city is derived from Anuraja (ninety kings)" This semantic construction was displaced by the operation of the *Mahavamsa*, which refers to the city as Anuradhapura, giving two versions of its founding: by a person named Anuradha, or under the constellation Anuradha. By the middle of the nineteenth century the semantic construction became fixed as Anuradhapura. Note that Anuradha is a proper name linked to founding; it has no connotation of ninety. This transformation is not merely semantic finger-pointing to the recent origins of a reinvented proper name, it provides us with a brief glimmer of a massive shift caused by the inscription of the *Mahavamsa*, a particular version of 'history', on the landscape.⁴

After the translation of the *Mahavamsa*, then, Anuradhapura was reconstructed anew. When excavation of ruined sites began in the late 1870s, after the report of the Archaeological Commission of Inquiry appointed in 1868, the reconstruction commenced. Measurements and reconstruction enabled classification and the "site" to become a "sight", framed by aesthetic categories. Here, "correct" proportions, "elegance," and "fine" details produced the category of "beauty" (Thuparamaya); breathtaking size produced "sublimity" (Jethavanarama); and, crucially, the availability of a sanitized, ordered "state of nature", marked by the clear expanses of clean water in the new tanks, (as opposed to a smelly, malarial jungle and stagnant pools) produces the "picturesque": a place suitable for painting and picnics. The category of the picturesque, relevant in current debates, is actually a product of the excavations at Anuradhapura, intimately tied to the reconstruction of artificial reservoirs.

'Discovered' by European exploration, and then unjungled, measured, marked, sanitized and made 'beautiful', Anuradhapura was now ready for Tourism: this marked the realization of the commodity value of Anuradhapura. By the end of the nineteenth century several guide books appeared, notable among them, Caves' *Ancient Cities of Ceylon* and Burrows' *Buried Cities*. The Fergusons, newspaper and book publishers, would, at regular intervals give "accounts of the progress made [in 'Ceylon'] since 1803," so that the "resources awaiting development by capitalists, and the unequalled attractions offered to visitors" would be widely known in the metropolis. In these late nineteenth century accounts, Anuradhapura was listed under "Attractions for the Traveller and Visitor."

These accounts, I must stress, were not only produced for and by Europeans. Take for example the much celebrated Sinhala-Buddhist revivalist and close associate of the Anagarika Dharmapala, the Brahmachari Walisinha Harischandra, who was active in Anuradhapura after 1899. Harischandra was involved in a series of disputes with colonial officials, and was arrested (and later tried and acquitted) after a riot in the city in June, 1903. In 1908, he

published a book that dealt with, among other things, the uprising, the circumstances surrounding it and his arrest: *The Sacred City of Anuradhapura*. Much of the text reproduces existing colonial knowledge about the "authentic history" of the ruined city. But the commodification of this 'history' that is produced by the larger structures of international capitalism sit lightly with Harischandra: the last section of his text, is a straightforward tourist guide. He notes that the extension of the railway to Anuradhapura in 1904, makes travel much easier, and then presents, in lovely detail, the "best way to see the shrines and ruins... within easy access... within a limited time, without the interference of unqualified guides, who relate absurd stories...". It is an account for wealthy tourists, not pilgrims; much like Fergusons' accounts, referred to earlier. Not only does Harischandra point to rest houses that the tourist can use, but he repeatedly notes the picturesque quality of the tanks: "the visitor may go to the bund of the Abaya Wewa," Harischandra writes, "[where] the cooling breeze that wafts from this tank will no doubt refresh the tourist." And finally comments that after the day's sightseeing, the tourist will find "a drive over that grand bund of the Nuwara Wewa," refreshing.

In the logic of Harischandra's text, then, tourism intersects easily with Anuradhapura. Why? The production of the commodities of 'history' and the 'picturesque' in the north central province, necessitates these very commodities of 'history' and the 'picturesque' to be consumed as well. And this means tourism, both local and international: hotels over looking tanks and guided tours to ruined cities. And, of course, profits to the share holders.

What then, is the space for a critical political project, given this reality? I wouldn't say this project is to be forgotten. Rather, that if we are to question the profits of these hotels, as part of a larger socialist project that opposes the alienation and surplus appropriation that is central to the logic of capital, then we must also, as part of the same project, question the signs of the reconstructed, commodified 'history' that dot the face of the country.

Notes

1. Colvin R. de Silva, *Ceylon under British Occupation*, vol.1, 1953:100.
2. For evidence of such social debate, even to this day, see Gananath Obeyesekere's "The Myth of Human Sacrifice: History, Story and Debate in a Buddhist Chronicle" in *Social Analysis* vol 25, 1989:78-93.
3. Tennent, *Ceylon 1859/1975*: 266. The incorrect leap of faith here is to assume that the *Mahavamsa* is locatable in a modern historiographic convention, neglecting notions such as incalculable time that are crucial to the text. If such notions are taken seriously, as they should be our reading changes dramatically: the period of the composition of the text can shift forward some 600 years. For such a brilliant reading of the *Mahavamsa* and associated commentarial texts see Jonathan Walters, "Positivist Paradise Lost: On the History of the Pali Chronicles of Sri Lanka" in *Post-Orientalist Strategies*, Ronald Inden (ed.) Delhi: 1992.
4. 'Anurajapura' could be thought of as a corruption/oral form of 'Anuradhapura': dha->da->ja. My point, however, concerns the meaning given to the earlier form (ja), by native speakers of the area, and the subsequent shift, in literate speech, with new meaning to the later form (dha).