

The ban on his books is actively implemented though I did see some clandestine copies. His editor and publisher have been subject to regular investigation and have spent time in detention. Students at the University of Indonesia were arrested and expelled when, in 1981, they invited Pramoedya to speak on the campus. Members of a study group at the Gajah Mada State University have been sentenced to seven years in jail on the charge that they possessed, read and discussed his novels. His translator, Max Lane was the Second Secretary in the Australian Embassy in Jakarta in 1980; he was recalled after pressure from the Indonesian government.

When I met him, he was working on an encyclopaedia of Indonesia. He cannot get a job; he can earn nothing from his writings within

Indonesia; his only income is from the royalties on the translations of his novels. He hopes that the encyclopaedia will not be banned; he hopes that it will accomplish two purposes - earn him some money and enable Indonesians to learn more about their vast archipelago and its peoples. When I told him that it might be difficult to keep value judgements out of even an encyclopedia, he replied that he would try to stick to bare facts.

I found him a man of humility. He was sad, angry but not bitter. He still had hopes for democracy in Indonesia.

Pramoedya Ananta Toer is a presence in Indonesia, even in his enforced silence.

C.A.

SINHALAS, THEIR EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL ORIGINS AND SCHOLARS FROM GAGALAND

Sasanka Perera

A few months ago I wrote an essay attempting to place in perspective the status of sociological and anthropological training and teaching in Sri Lanka. The picture I painted, with which many people agreed, was not good. Sri Lankan higher education in general, and social science education in particular, is clearly in a state of serious crisis. The combined fields of sociology and anthropology are perhaps the worst affected in this climate of intellectual pauperization even though the situation is not much different in the rest of social sciences. An example that would amply illustrate this generalization has been offered by two articles published in the *Sunday Observer* of 12th May 1996 and 07th July 1996.

The original article authored by Mihindukulasuriya Susantha Fernando published on the 12th of May argues that the Sinhals are the descendants of gods or extra-terrestrial beings. He has already taken for granted that the ancient Egyptians were also the descendants of such space persons. He treats this as a historical reality and uses it for comparison with the case of the Sinhals. After posing the question as to the extra-terrestrial origins of the Sinhals, Fernando answers in the affirmative by stating that the "answer is found in the historical perspective of superhuman feats, incredible bravery, awe-inspiring spiritual enlightenment, and steadfast moral uprightness of the ancient Sinhala" (SO 12 May 1996). However, this kind of self-congratulatory and pompous descriptions of the perceived heritage of the ethno-religious or cultural group one belongs to is common to every human person, and is deeply rooted in what seems to be humanity's inherent ethnocentrism. Such statements do not constitute reasoned arguments.

Fantasies of Extra-Terrestrials

Humans have always had a fascination with extra-terrestrial beings and space ships. There is nothing strange about it. A healthy imagination is in fact an asset. But when that imagination makes nonsensical inroads into academia there is a clear reason for alarm. After all, there is a legitimate need to distinguish between clear fiction and possible fact. As we know, many space buffs and pseudo historians have speculated for a long time that extra-terrestrial beings have landed on earth at various points in time and even transferred some technology long before modern NGOs. The "proof" for such landings usually amounts to highly speculative assumptions and rock paintings of figures that look similar to modern space travellers from earth. These assumptions are usually based on lack of knowledge or evidence in the archaeological record to clearly indicate how a certain great monument was constructed at a particular point in time when technology was not adequately sophisticated.

So it seems that the obvious answer is that such monuments might be the work of extra-terrestrials or earthlings who got tuition from them. The rock paintings, it would appear, depict the tuition masters. Many such explanations come from academics who try to explain monuments in the ancient world including the pyramids in Egypt as well as many Mayan and Inca monuments. The mythic continent of Atlantis was another source of such speculation. But none of these speculations ever gained any serious legitimacy within mainstream historical, archaeological or anthropological scholarship.

Fernando seems to be heavily influenced by such pseudo-academic writings. Let us see for a moment the nature of evidence provided by Fernando to support his claims. Among other things, this "proof" amounts to Sinhala's "inexplicable fascination for building colossal monuments called stupas rising mysteriously to the high heavens" (SO 12 May 1996). What is so inexplicable about the construction of the stupas? As we know they were relic chambers. Such large monuments could be built because there were adequate material and human resources at the disposal of the rulers thanks to the highly hierarchical nature of social and political organization of the times. Besides, there are structurally similar, and sometimes much more sophisticated monuments all over the world. The Mayan and Inca pyramids as well as all the stupas and temple complexes in Asia such as Borobudhur can be identified as some of these. Then there are also the massive sculptures of little known people such as the Olmec as well as structures at Stonehenge that also pose certain challenges to historians as well as archaeologists.

They are also "mysteriously rising to the high heavens" to quote Fernando's own words. Perhaps we can make a generalization here. If massive monuments in Sri Lanka and Egypt indicate extra-terrestrial influence, perhaps all other such monuments dotted across the globe show similar influences as well. Let me speculate further. In ancient times, earth was probably a camping ground for extra-terrestrial loafers. They landed their little flying saucers, peed into holes in the ground which instantly became gigantic lakes helping earthlings construct hydraulic civilizations, ate their little green sandwiches, drank their green drinks out of crystal flasks, gave tuition to a few earth lubbers on the procedures of monument construction, perhaps built a few structures themselves to park their flying saucers, had sex with a few Sinhala, Egyptian and other women in order to "father" a few chosen ethno-cultural groups (Eg., the Sinhala and the Egyptians according to Fernando), and then climbed back onto their little flying saucers and flew away in to the blue skies.

Fernando's other proof of extra-terrestrial loitering in Sri Lanka are the references to giants, gods and *yakshas* (usually referred to as demons in the post colonial anthropological literature) in the ancient chronicles. These were apparently various kinds of extra terrestrials. What a revelation. And all of this, thanks to Mr. Fernando's refreshing theorizing. I propose that we close down all the history, sociology and archeology departments in the local universities since none of the scholars in these institutions were able to figure out any of this wonderful and mind boggling "evidence" before Fernando. I am even ashamed to call them my colleagues!

Fernando has also circulated a questionnaire (apparently using a mailing list from the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka) in which he poses the following three mind boggling questions:

- 1) Have you observed, or heard of any unusual flying objects in the skies over Sri Lanka? If so, when, where, and how?
- 2) Have you observed in the countryside or towns in Sri Lanka any phenomenal incident or sight, which are incompatible with the natural laws of nature? If so, when, where, and how? Instances of black magic not wanted.

3) Do you believe, or not, in the Sinhala as having had contacts with celestial beings, or powers?

I suppose in the mind of Fernando the circulation of this questionnaire gives his cosmic project a certain kind of "scientific rationality". After all, if a bunch of zany people say they have seen flying objects over the skies of Sri Lanka from which celestial persons descended, it must be true. That should be good enough material for the book he is supposed to be writing.

Scholars from Gagaland

Sarcasm apart, all of this point to serious problems in Sri Lankan academia. Personally, I have no problems with Fernando who has been described variously as a historian, scholar and journalist, in that particular order (SO 07 July 1996). He has simply let his imagination run wild within the pages of the *Sunday Observer*. There is no real harm in that. It was in fact fun to read his article. The harm was caused by the so called academics or scholars who commented on this extrar-terrestrial rigmarole and attempted to give this hyperbole some kind of legitimacy. This is what reflects so badly on Sri Lankan scholarship in general. A visiting colleague from the United States, after reading the two articles asked me quite earnestly "how can you allow these people to teach your kids? Which century are these people living in"? In fact, it was that question and the shame I felt as a member of that same community that made me write this article in response.

Professor M.B. Ariyapala is supposed to have stated: "Susantha Fernando has made a major breakthrough in the study of the Sinhala race. It is really wonderful. He needs unstinted support from all quarters for the greater good of the Sinhala nation" (SO 07 July 1996). Only in Sri Lanka, in the pauperized intellectual climate of the present, could any sane person call this kind of science fiction narratives "a major breakthrough". The only unstinted support one could give Fernando would be to write science fiction novels for children and naive scholars. Professor Nandasena Ratnapala, identified as a professor of anthropology, is supposed to have acclaimed the space story as "revolutionary" (SO 07 July 1996). It is revolutionary only in its extreme naivety. Professor Ratnapala is further supposed to have said: "Mr. Susantha Fernando's original concepts are very fresh views of an area which is of great interest to every one of us" (SO 07 July 1996). There is not a single "fresh concept" in this space fantasy, which has been the fantasy of many people for over hundreds, or even thousands of years. The only thing "fresh" here is Fernando's application of these space fantasies to the origins of the Sinhala which has hitherto been dominated by the famous Sinhabahu myth.

R.C. de S Manukulasuriya who is apparently the President of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka is supposed to have stated: "Until Susantha Fernando discovered them, no one had ever thought of, yet alone written and published those strange parallels between the ancient Egyptian and ancient Sinhala civilizations" (SO 07 July 1996). I have a news flash for Mr. Manukulasuriya. Until the diffusionist perspective went out fashion within anthropology in the 1930s or so, members of both British and German schools of

diffusionism wasted their entire lives documenting such so called "strange parallels" including the pyramids of Egypt and Asian stupas. So such things have been thought of and written about long before Mr. Fernando was born by members of a theoretical school now discredited within anthropology. This could have been easily clarified if any of these learned scholars had read a few widely available books, asked a few people who were competent in such matters, or at the very least consulted a student following the "Advanced Sociological Theory" course offered by the Department of Sociology at University of Colombo.

Conclusion

These space fantasies are of course not merely the result of the prevailing problematic academic climate. It is also the result of the socially and politically unstable times we are currently experiencing. In such times it is hardly surprising if people come up with millenarian stories such as these. In both Melanesia and parts of North America, at the height of the destruction caused by European colonial expansion, anthropologists have documented the emergence of what is known in the literature as "Cargo Cults". Simply put, the narratives associated with cargo cults encourage people to return to lost roots, and the participants in the cult hold the expectation that their ancestors would return soon in the future and

re-establish the stability of the lost social order. Cargo Cults are mechanisms of coping in the midst of serious socio-political crisis. I would also place Fernando's fantasy in a similar category. He even argues that the "gods do come to the 20th century Sinhala in unknown, mysterious ways; they have not forsaken us" (SO 12 May 1996). The academics' enthusiasm for this fantasy may have resulted from the millenarian notions they themselves entertain. Fernando simply happened to write in an easily accessible widely circulating newspaper to articulate such fantasies in public.

To have such fantasies is well within a person's basic human rights. But to confuse the younger generations with such nonsense is unforgivable. What is also unforgivable is what seems to be these scholars' apparent unfamiliarity with the widely available and serious scholarship dealing with the complex patterns and dynamics involved in the peopling of Sri Lanka and the processes of forming different ethno-cultural identities. That is why their enthusiasm for this space story is much more than a mere millenarian fantasy. It also raises the question of the intellectual quality of Sri Lankan academia-or rather the intellectual quality of a well established and influential section within it. If this is an indication of the quality of Sri Lankan scholarship in the social sciences, perhaps all of us should pray for those extra-terrestrial loafers, or at least some of the eighty four thousand deities in the Sinhala Buddhist cosmos to come and rescue us from this pitiful situation. ■

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On a General Election

The accursed power which stands on Privilege
(And goes with Women, and Champagne and Bridge)
Broke - and Democracy resumed her reign:
(Which goes with Bridge, and Women and Champagne).

Hilaire Belloc