

PAST IN THE PRESENT: THE PROBLEMATIC OF INTERPRETING 'HISTORY' IN A PLURAL SOCIETY

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How did the present create the past? (Chapman et al. 1985:5) Although the major identity components of the Sinhalese are their Sinhalese language and their Buddhist religion, and of the Tamils their Tamil language and their Hindu religion, both these populations share many parallel features of traditional caste, kinship, popular religious cults, customs, and so on. But they have come to be divided by their mythic charters and tendentious historical understanding of their pasts. (S.J. Tambiah 1986:5)

The Sri Lankan population is culturally and socially heterogeneous with great historical and literary traditions. Hence, Sri Lanka is ideal for the exploration of the possibilities of a historical and ethnographical work. Much of the recent anthropological work on Sri Lanka has taken a historical and ethnographical path in order to examine the conflict between the Sinhala and Tamils that began to unfold after Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 (Tambiah 1986, 1992; Kapferer 1989; Spencer 1990; Kemper 1991). These studies have examined the relationship between Buddhism and Sinhala national identity, and in broader sense the role of Buddhism as a tool of political legitimisation in historical contexts.

In this essay I will give a brief account of how nationalist history has been constructed in Sri Lanka and how it becomes problematic when it is used in the present. According to recent historians (Gunavardana 1995, Rogers 1990) the local (indigenous) and colonial (mainly British) historical materials which have been constructed about Sri Lanka and its people cannot be separated from each other because the content of colonial histories was drawn directly from a local written tradition. By 'local written tradition,' I mean the kind of history that was written in ancient historical chronicles, such as Pali (a scholarly language of Buddhist monks) chronicles of the island¹ (eg. The *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*), and Sinhala literature. Hence, the present content and appeal of the histories of Sri Lanka and its people, created when the island was under British rule, were subject to many influences, including the type of sources available, the broader trends in European historical writing, and the ideological and social positions of the authors and their intended audiences.

However, Sri Lanka writers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries failed to question colonial forms of knowledge. Instead, they were heavily dependent on colonial writings and produced voluminous historical materials on Sri Lanka. Not only did they make frequent references to the accounts of these British writers, but they also accepted their general methodological framework (Rogers 1990). Hence, the construction of an ancient past through colonial forms of knowledge has strongly influenced

the way Sri Lankans conceive their own past. Therefore, when someone uses historical sources about Sri Lanka they must be aware of the historical ambiguity.

Let me explain this ambiguity through a text composed in the sixth century A.D. The *Mahavamsa* is a verse chronicle written in the Pali language by a Buddhist monk and is a major source of the early history of the island. It is also a text which figures large in Sinhala national history and it has been periodically updated.² The *Mahavamsa* represents, in the words of Heinz Bechert, "the only early historical literature within the realm of South Asian culture" (1978: 3). However, as I mentioned before, British interest in the chronicle literature of Sri Lanka developed through the nineteenth century. The first English language translation of the *Mahavamsa*, edited by Upham, was published in London in 1833 alongside two other texts. They were presented as "the first specimen of an original and genuine Buddhist history that has been offered to the public" (Upham 1833: vi). But Upham's version of the *Mahavamsa* was soon discredited by Turnour, who had studied Pali with senior monks in Kandy, and who replaced it with his own translation, published in Ceylon in 1837. The *Mahavamsa* he wrote with admiration, contained "an uninterrupted historical record of nearly twenty four centuries." Turnour also produced an *Epitome of Ceylon History* based on the *Mahavamsa* and other manuscript sources and his findings quickly became standard orthodoxy among British officials (Bechert 1978: 4).

The critical edition of the *Mahavamsa*, which is still used today, was produced by Wilhelm Geiger in 1908. This version is published in Pali and in English by the Pali Text Society. Geiger declared, "we are still far from being able to restore the ... of the *Mahavamsa* in its pure and original form" (LV, cf; Bechert 1977). His task was to make a scientific translation of the *Mahavamsa*. The scientific character of Geiger's work had unintended results for the popular impact of his research (Kemper 1991:90). The historicity of the chronicles was debated, but the *Mahavamsa* became a critical text in investigating the early history and archaeology of the island. The *Mahavamsa* and other historical chronicles were known or thought relevant among Sinhala people in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Rogers 1990: 89).

According to the popular myth exemplified in the *Mahavamsa* account:

The island of Sri Lanka was originally inhabited by nonhumans – *yakas* and *nagas* – (demons and snake-people). The first chapter of the chronicle records three visits of the Buddha to Sri Lanka. The first visit was when at the

ninth month of his Buddhahood, at the full moon day, [he] himself set forth to the isle of Lanka, to win Lanka for the faith. For Lanka was known to the Conqueror as a place where his doctrine should [thereafter] shine in glory; and [he knew that] from Lanka, filled with *yakkhas*, the *yakkhas* must be drawn forth. In his first trip he quelled the demons at Mahiyangana in eastern Sri Lanka, which today is a leading pilgrimage centre where people go to worship the collarbone relic of the Buddha and propitiate the powerful deities, Saman and Kataragama, that reside there. During his second visit he quelled and converted the *nagas* or snake-beings that dwelled in the northern tip of the island known as *nagadipa*, which was also a centre of Buddhist pilgrimage until recently.³ His third visit, eight years after his enlightenment, was to Kelaniya, near Colombo. During this visit he also left traces of his footprint plain to see on Sumanakuta (Sri Pada or Adam's Peak), an impressive peak, the foremost place of Buddhist pilgrimage. From there he went to Digavapi on the East Coast, and to various places in Anuradhapura, which later became the first capital of the Sinhala king.

All these places consecrated by the Buddha have been, and still are, great centres of Buddhist pilgrimage. The significance of the myth is clear; the island has been consecrated by the Buddha himself and "malevolent" forces have been banished or subjugated or converted preparatory to the arrival of the founder of the Sinhala "nation," Prince Vijaya..." (cf. Obeyesekere 1995: 224-5)

The publication of the *Mahavamsa* and other indigenous works that included historical narratives undoubtedly contributed to increased awareness of the island's past. For example, nineteenth-century racial theory, which had developed from studies of language and evolution, deeply influenced colonial policy. Racial categories appeared to apply to enduring, bounded groupings with inherent cultural characteristics, and the British rectified such groups by institutionalising them in various ways and by reading these categories into the past (Nissan and Stirrat 1987). After some dispute on the matter, the Sinhala were established as Indo-Aryans and the Tamil as Dravidians and these categories were remarkably easily mapped onto a chronicled history, which had already made its mark on European scholarship in the island (Gunawardana 1979). Similarly, Nissan (1985) argues that the use of the *Mahavamsa* to validate nationalist conceptions of the island does not reflect its content and is best understood through the process by which authority was given to this text as a Sinhala national history by Europeans.

Once European scholars were viewing the ancient past in this way through local materials, it was but a short step for elite local activists, educated in European schools and tastes, to take up these terms, reflect on their situations in the light of those terms and construe their resistance to European superiority accordingly. Buddhist historical chronicles and Buddhist archaeological

materials were being used to make this new kind of national history (Nissan 1985). Most people in Sri Lanka do not learn Sinhala national history directly from the *Mahavamsa*. It is disseminated through school books, modern history books, newspaper articles, preaching, political speeches, broadcasts and other such sources. Where that history refers to the deeds of kings, which is frequently the case, they are incorporated into a broad sense of the Sinhala national heritage, which is believed to be represented in that early chronicle, the *Mahavamsa*. The *Mahavamsa* explains the island and its government as traditionally Sinhala and Buddhist, and that a person cannot be Buddhist without being Sinhala.

In the nineteenth century, when Sinhala-Buddhists began to assert themselves as an ethnic community, as one nation among many, they began to emphasise not only their past, but also their love of knowledge of the past as part of their identity. As their understanding of Sinhala-Buddhist identity was appropriated and exploited by politicians from the 1930s onwards, the *Mahavamsa* provided both content and legitimacy for an increasingly vociferous Sinhala nationalism. According to Spencer, the importance of the *Mahavamsa* in modern Sinhala nationalism is two-fold. As an apparently authentic text it was especially well-suited to colonial preconceptions about the relationship between history and identity. But the stories it contain, and the presuppositions upon which it is based, would inevitably push any later ideological use of it in some directions and not in others; a nationalism based upon the *Mahavamsa* would have to be Buddhist nationalism with little space for non-Buddhist identities (1990 : 6).

The *Mahavamsa* view posits a 'Buddhist State' in Tambiah's sense, that is, a political order consisting of a king, a people, and a religion bound to each other in symbiosis (1976). The nationalist resurgence of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries added impetus to focusing research, resources and interest on the *Mahavamsa* view (nationalist reading), and indeed in some instances research mingled freely with the Buddhist revivalist-inspired restoration of ancient monuments and the rediscovery of the lost cities (see Nissan 1989). The form this national history took was influenced by currents in European scholarship of the time, which produced a national reading of certain texts which were demonstrably ancient (at least as constructed by European scholarship). The strains of nationalist reading of the *Mahavamsa* have been neatly depicted by Steven Kemper, who highlights that the *Mahavamsa* presented a vision of a Sinhala-Buddhist polity and this has strongly coloured not only popular discourses but also much of the historiography of the island (1991). As we have seen, this kind of reading has not remained static, it has continually influenced present day reading of historical sources of Sri Lanka as well.

These interpretations of the past are problematic. Through them, the modern state is represented as successor to a Sinhala-Buddhist past, but such representations of national history fail to allow for the fact that Sri Lanka's population is ethnically and religiously plural. Sri Lanka's population was 18.6 million in 1996 and it conventionally divided along two lines: ethnicity and religion.

Sinhala comprise 74% of the population, the Tamils 18%, Moors 7%, and the small groups of Burghers, Malays and indigenous people (Vaddas). Broken down in terms of religious affiliation, approximately 69% were Buddhist, 15% Hindu, 8% Muslim and 7% Catholic. The relationship between these two classifications is as follows: most Sinhala are Buddhist; most Tamils are Hindu; all Moors are Muslims; Catholics might be either Sinhala or Tamil.

As I mentioned earlier, in the nineteenth century, a national Sinhala Buddhist history³ was read into the ancient historical chronicles (eg. The *Mahavamsa*) of the island. The chronicles were interpreted as showing that the country (*rata*), the 'race' Sinhala (*jatiya*) and the 'religion' Buddhist (*agama*) have an interdependent destiny, ordained by the Buddha himself. Whether this reading accurately reflects the content of the chronicles or not is a question discussed by Gunawardana (1995), who concludes that it does not. However, it does represent the premise of the national history, which the majority of the Sinhala now accept.

Representations of the state of Sri Lanka as primarily Sinhala and Buddhist have been at once unifying and divisive. The colonial era saw the beginning of a process through which a broad, historic 'Sinhala-Buddhist' identity⁴ was created, which could encompass caste and regional commitments and which was closely linked to the idea of the island as a political entity. As this sense of Sinhala identity has become manifest in the polity, particularly since independence, non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist sections of the population have been excluded from a full sense of participation in the island's history and future. The painful results of such national imagining are seen in the current ethnic conflict in the island.

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Notes

1. Most of the ancient Buddhist Pali chronicles were translated into European languages by western indologists (eg. Wilhelm Geiger, Max Muller) through the Pali Text Society in London.
2. This was lastly updated in the J.R. Jayewardene's regime (see Kemper 1991).
3. The Champion of the Buddhist movement of this period, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), inscribed the virtues of the island's past as the glorious history of the Sinhala Buddhist people, fostered by later advocates, both monk and lay (see Seneviratne 1999).
4. Obeysere 1979, 1995 argues that it emerged in the period before the arrival of the colonial powers. ■

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