This essay does not purport to supply a comprehensive coverage of the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka today, whether in its historical lineaments or its situation now. That would require a book. Within the constraints of space its forcus is thematic. No essay on the subject can be a-political, and thus unbiased. There are degrees of bias , however. Those endeavours that are partisan are often blatantly so. Given the presence of such partisans, even a relatively clinical study becomes a tool in the ethnic struggle-- either drawing fire or being selectively mined for nuggets which support this or that partisan claim. All history, and thus all history-writing, becomes verbal dynamite.

OF TRADITIONS, MEMORIES AND IDEOLOGICAL BLOCKAGES

Michael Roberts

Aboriginal Claims

Time can be a measure of value. In Australia Aboriginal notions of time, in their 'original' form, do not seem to have been organised in the pattern of linear, measured time common to the modern Western traditions. But, as they have been overwhelmed by the power of their Anglo-Celtic conquerors, the chronological time-keeping of the White settlers has become a resource for Aboriginal survivior today. Contemporary Aboriginal spokespersons can readily claim that they were here first. Both archaeological finds and early British documents attest to that. The Whites are caught within their own net.

That which is first has priority of claims. Stakes to place, to property. Finders keepers. Founding fathers. A powerful principle this. It is an ingredient which , in specific circumstances, can render all history-writing and all archaeological work into powerful powders, the embers of passionate and partisan political debate. That condition has now enveloped Sri Lankan research. Partisans on both sides of the ethnic divide are seeking to out-archaeologise each other: " we are the Uhr, the original inhabitants". Primordiality is premium.

Yet, all Sri Lankans also believe that the original inhabitants were the Veddahs, the forest people studies by the Seligmanns, R.L. Spittel *et al.* These Veddahs are, today, a mere handful. Even in the nineteenth century their numbers were small. And they were in the deep jungle of the north-central and eastern regions. That is, over time their descendants have either become Sinhalese[1] or Tamil or Sinhala gypsies *(Ahikuṇṭakayo).*

For all that they are a powerful ideological category in the Sinhalese traditions. They represent the potency of the wild. Through the *Valiyak Nätuma,* or Valiyak dance, they figure in the festival of life renewal known as the *Äsala* festival, one so central to the reproduction of the Sinhala order in the view of those who think cosmologically.[2] It is not accidental, therefore, that a seperate column was reserved for the Veddahs in the decennial censuses dating from 1881—contrasting with the Borahs, Sindhis, Parsees, Colombo Chetties and other tiny minorities who disappear into the column "Other".

Such 'firstness' has never been seen as a basis for political claims. The island of Sri Lanka has been regarded—widely in the past and now in acrimonious contestation —as a Sinhala land, the land of the Sinhalese.

This perception is due to the force of historical traditions among the Sinhalese people—traditions which are organised in a linear manner qualified by an attentiveness to the cycles of decline and fall. These traditions are most strongly embodied in a sixth century Pali chronicle, the *Mahavamsa.* This in turn was based on palm-leaf texts in old Sinhala (the *Sīhala-atthakattā-mahāvaṃsa*) and oral traditions.

The *Mahāvaṃsa* elaborated these traditions to carify how it was that Sri Lanka was known as "*Sīhala*" and the people as "*Sīhala*" (i.e. Sinhalese, Sinhala). It built up a chieftain named Duṭṭhagāmini from the second century B.C. into an epic hero-king. And traced the dynastic line to a founding immigrant, Vijaya. Vijaya is seen today as the founding father of the Sinhala people—Genesis, Adam and captain Cook rolled into one body.

This founding act, Vijaya's act, was, and is a missionary act: to prepare the island and its people for the preservation of Buddhism in its pristine purity. This is the message of the *Mahāvaṃsa.* In these terms the Sinhalese are a chosen people.[3]

This tradition should be regarded as aspecific instance in the history of Theravāda Buddhism. In the Burmese tradition, they, the Burmese, are the chosen people.[4] Neither Burmese nor Sinhalese attend to each other during the moment of such historical interpretation.

The *Mahāvaṃsa* was the work of a Buddhist monk (and so too its continuations.) It was also a court chronicle, presenting an ideology of state.[5] It linked the Buddha, the island, the dynasty of kings

and the people into one unity: Sri Lanka is *Dhammadīpa*, Sri Lanka is *Sīhadīpa*, that is, Sri Lanka is the island of the *Dhamma* and the *Sīhala*.

That these traditions were the constructs of the literati does not mean that they were confined to the elites of their day. This is moot ground, but it is my speculation that from the sixth century critical themes and extracts from the *Mahāvaṃsa* ideology were widely diffused in the Sinhala medium within the folk culture of the masses—being reproduced, extended and reworked by the import of sacred sites, pilgrimages, pictorial and achitectural representations, oral stories, ritual acts, stories attached to place names etc etc...[6]

The *Dhammadipa* and *Sihadipa* concepts, therefore, remained active despite the consolidation of a state ruled by Tamil kings in the north of the island from the thirteenth century to the sixteenth, and the territorial intrusions of Western colonial powers from the sixteenth century. Indeed, the wars arising from these events could be said to have sharpened the collective consciousness of the Sinhalese—and thus rendered the *Mahāvaṃsa* ideology all the stronger.[7]

Thus, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the more-or-less landlocked Kingdom of Kandy was known as *Sīhalē*. As *Sīhalē* this state was considered the heir to the heritage of past Sinhalese civilisations. Indeed, *Sīhalē* embraced the whole island—ideologically speaking.[8]

Here the mode of thinking was analogic, in the form of a synecdoche, where a part represents a whole (eg. where "a sail a sail! refers to a ship). It is this modality of thinking which enables *the centre* to represent the whole, so that the circumambulation of the city of Kandy stands for the conquest of the whole kingdom.[9]

The British and Thereafter

As printed documents and ideas of history in their modern from entered the island in the British era, the Sinhalese traditions received a more definitive cast. The British literati and the colonial state endorsed these views—which then entered the early history books. In drawing such conclusions the British were undoubtedly influenced by the presence of old palm-leaf documents, the impressive ruins of ancient civilisations and the chronological continuity which such artefacts demonstrated. That the Sinhala speakers were the vast majority of the population was a backdrop that informed such conclusions.

Such latter-day modes of historical representation, therefore, emphasised the notion that "Ceylon" was a Sinhalese country. This understanding extended beyond the British authorities to many other indigenous residents of non-Sinhala stock.[10] Indeed, I suspect that many Tamils of the British era were party to this view (though it woul be a bold Tamil today who would research and parade such facts). In other words, in the British period the Sinhalese view of their history received confimation from the understandings of significant others in their immediate contiguity..

As in times past, the fact that Lanka is an island gave this idea a territorial clarity. As universal franchise was brought into efffect from 1931, this understanding received a further boost. The Sinhala view of its "historical ownership" now had the support of the democratic principle, the rule of the majority.[11] This received its greatest emphasis in the year 1956 when a populist swell of Sinhalese linguistic nationalism 'dethroned' the symbols of Western supremacy—specifically the primacy of the English language.

Blockage of the *Hita*

Thus strengthened, the Sinhalese view of their history and Lanka's history makes it difficult for some Sinhalese to deal with the claim of the minority groups residing in the island. Such Sinhalese have blocked previous attemps at accommodation which tried to secure a viable polity through political horse-trading: in 1925, in 1940, in 1957 following the Bandaranaike-Chelavanayagam pact, in 1965-67 and in 1980-81 such efforts were variously undermined. In 1925-29 the Mahendra Agreement was jettisoned on the ground that "we are all Ceylonese, so no deals are required". In 1940 it was argued that such dealing would only encourage "Tamil communalists" to pitch their claims higher.[12]

Looking back from 1994 it is starkly evident that the previous failiures by the majoritarian spokespersons to give political concessions to the Tamil activitists have resulted in the claims of the Tamils being pitched higher—to the point of demanding seperation from Sri Lanka as Eelam. At every stage the more radical Tamil claimants have displaced the more moderate: between 1947 and 1956 the Federal Party displaced the Tamil Congress, and beween 1972 and 1983 the revolutionary Eelamists displaced those in the lineage of the Federal Party.

This has been the tragedy of Sri Lanka in recent times. In the late British era and till well into the 1960s/1970s most "Ceylon Tamils" (both a census and popular category) were both Tamil and Ceylonese. These affiliations were not mutually exclusive, but elements in a segmentary structure of collective consciousness where "Ceylonese" (Sri Lankan) could encompass "Tamil".[13] That is no longer so.

How this has come to pass is an intricate story, though the memories of the "riots" of 1958,1977 and 1983 are an important force in the thinking of Tamil on this point. This article has not attempted to clarify that story in a comprehensive manner. On strained by space its intent is directed towards highlighting one dimension worthy of attention, viz the force of the *Dhammadīpa* and *Sīhadipa* concepts in the thinking of many contempory Sinhalese.

Given such thinking, the spectre of Eelam, the idea of splitting the *dīpa* (island), is a terrible spectre, quite inconceivable to some Sinhalese. For the *Mahāvaṃsa* ideology is etched deeply in their being. This concern may be voiced in seemingly rational terms: "is it feasible", you will be asked, "to have two states in one small island"? "Is Eelam viable?" (it is said that Rajiv Gandhi put this more arrogantly: "into how many pieces can you cut a peanut"—for which a price was paid!). But, if my speculative thesis is valid,

behind this seemingly rational question there is something unsaid. There is a disturbance of the *hita* (the mind-cum-heart, the whole fullness of being, Dasein). To those Sinhalese so moved (and how can anyone assess the numbers here!) Eelam is unthinkable. Behind the zealotry of Sinhala chauvinists today, I suspect, lies this impulse.

Notes

1. See Bryce Rayan 1950: 240-44 and Brow 1978.
2. Seneviratne 1978: 108, 178.
3. The previous three paragraphs are based on amplifications in Malagoda 1993: 610; Roberts1985: 412-15; and 1993:142-43; and Kemper 1991: *passim.*
4. Sarkisyanz 1985.
5. Kemper 1991:2, 37ff., 47ff. and 53ff; and Gunawardana 1991: 58ff. Also see Perera 1961.
6. Roberts 1993: 141-47. Also see R. Obeysekere 1979; G. Obeysekere 1989 and Kemper 1991.
7. K.M. de Silva 1981:134.
8. Paul E. Pieris 1945: 114-15: and Roberts 1993: 146.
9. On analogic thinking, see Guha 1983: and Fernandez 1986:7. On *pradaksina,* or circumambulation, see Seneviratne 1978: 84-85.
10. E.g. Quite explicitly witnessed in the writings of the Burghers in the*Young Ceylon* circle in the 1850s.
11. Roberts 1992: 21-22.
12. Roberts 1993:*passim.*
13. Roberts 1979: 38-43 and Cheran 1992:48.

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