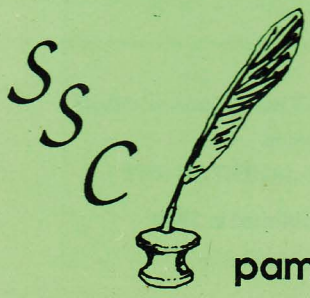
Three Dispositions
Towards the Past :
One Sinhala, Two Tamil

E VALENTINE DANIEL



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THREE DISPOSITIONS TOWARDS THE PAST: ONE SINHALA, TWO TAMIL

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In this paper I discuss two polar, albeit ideal-typical orientations a people may assume towards the past. The one, I shall call history, and the other, heritage. I shall argue that in the Sri Lankan ethnohistorical context, the Sinhalese privilege history, whereas the Sri Lankan Tamils privilege heritage. The second and the more extensive section of the paper will be concerned with a third ethnic subgroup, the "Estate Tamils", who may be seen to combine both stances towards the past in the process of defining who they are. The dispositions under consideration are held to be an integral part of ethnic identity. They entail perceptions, but they are more, embodying practices as well.[1]

The Major Players

There was a time when the location of residence mattered more than language. The Sinhalese, who now make up 74% of the island's population, had self-consciously divided and defined themselves as either Low Country Sinhalese or Kandyan Sinhalese.[2] The more recent linguistic nationalism has subjugated the importance of locality to language, thereby making linguistic identity primary, under which all speakers of Sinhala are united. The other group whose contribution to the rise of linguistic nationalism are the "Ceylon", "Sri Lankan" or "Indigenous" Tamils. This group now constitutes 12.6% of the nation's population. For perspectival reasons, to be explained shortly (q.v. footnote 3), I call them "Jaffna Tamils".

Members of the third ethnic group, all of whom are Tamil speakers, are either directly or indirectly linked to the tea plantations. According to the 1981 census this group made up 5.6% of the population. At its peak (1953) this group constituted 12% of the island's population, one percent more than the number of Jaffna Tamils. They also exceeded the Jaffna Tamil total in the 1946 census. In fact, their number is likely to have been higher then (as now) since fears of being accused of illicit residence in the island promoted many of these Tamils to duck the census takers. I shall, for reasons that will become clear, call this group, "Estate Tamils" and foreground them in this essay, privileging an "Estate Tamil" point of view.[3]

The identity of the "Estate Tamil", more than that of any of the others, is caught in the throes of change; a change that implicates both history and heritage. I shall enter into the problematique of history, heritage, identity and change by considering the nomenclatural discomfiture that these Tamils find themselves in. The reason for my choosing such an entry point is as follows: Gottlob Frege taught us that in addition to their ordinary *reference* referring terms have *sense* (1960:56-78). A name is such a term. A referring term is presumed to mean what it does merely by virtue of what it refers to. "That is, their contribution to the

meaning of sentences they occur in is entirely to 'tie' these sentences to the things (or sets of things) they name" (Martin 1987:143). Built into a theory of reference is the conceit of the *objectivity* of meaning; the realization of an external objective thing. A theory of *sense* by contrast implicates an expression and certain circumstances of its use in people's habits of thought and action. In the prevailing political and historical discourse in and about Sri Lanka, the presumption is that what matters ultimately is *reference*. While some terms are argued about (for example, who came first to the island, the Sinhalese or the Tamil), others are taken to be beyond referential doubt (for example that the name "Sinhalese" or "Tamil" refers to an unambiguous "set of animate objects" (to resort to language philosophers' manner of phrasing the matter). In concerning myself with names and naming as it pertains to the "Estate Tamils" quest for the "right name" by which they would like to be called, I hope to show more generally how and why *sense* matters more than reference.

What's is a Name?

The worldly wise in Sri Lanka describe the current turmoil in that island nation as an inter-ethnic conflict. More specifically, the conflict is called the Sinhala-Tamil conflict, implying thereby that the parties to the conflict are a monolithic Sinhala ethnic group on the one hand, and an equally monolithic Tamil ethnic group on the other. When political expediency calls for it, an exception is made for a third group, the Muslims (See K.M. de Silva 1986: 227-235). Nowadays, Muslims consider themselves as neither Tamils nor Sinhalese, but have, in times past, identified themselves now with the one, and then with the other.[4]

However, in discussions on ethnicity, the Estate Tamils are denied a distinct identity and lumped together with the rest of the Sri Lanka's Tamils. Most Estate Tamils I have interviewed resent such a simple identification extended to them by the Sinhalese and the Jaffna Tamils, an identification seen as serving the last two groups' respective political interests. As these Estate Tamils see it, the Jaffna Tamils choose to include them under a single Tamil rubric only in times of crisis in order to force Indian intervention during the periodic communal riots, since among these Estate Tamils are some actual or potential Indian citizens, which has justified such intervention in the past.[5]

For the Sinhalese, viewing these two groups of Tamils as one helps sustain in parallel, two opposed but complementary stereotypical characterizations of all Tamils. The Jaffna Tamils take care of the one stereotype: Tamils are privileged, caste conscious, calculating, given to usury, intelligent but crafty, rich and miserly. Estate Tamils on their part believe this to be true, but true only of Jaffna Tamils. Tamils in general (for the Sinhalese) and Jaffna Tamils in particular (for

the Estate Tamils) are the ones who hold the best jobs, monopolize the professions, control the economy, have huge bank accounts, and whose women wear the most gold jewelery and expensive silk sarees. When government pamphlets proclaim that "in the economic sphere, . . . ranging from the largest industrial ventures to the smallest entrepreneurial enterprise, the Tamils have achieved signal success", this is the stereotype they promote (*Ministry of State Publication* 1983). And again the Estate Tamils hold that this is true of the Jaffna Tamils but not of themselves. Not all or even most Jaffna Tamils fit this simple stereotype. But then popular perceptions are popular precisely because they do not entertain complexity. The very label, "Jaffna Tamil", is in itself another mark of this simplification, named after the nothern peninsula of Jaffna which is seen as the cultural center or capital of all these other Tamils.[6] The Tamils of Trincomalee, Batticaloa, Mannar, and Vavuniya, who would not wish to be so easily equated with the Tamils of Jaffna, and who resent the cultural "hegemony" of the peninsular Tamils over them are not, from the Sinhalese and Estate Tamil points of view, seen as being any different. For the Estate Tamils, they are all "Jaffna Tamils". The Estate Tamils exemplify the opposite pole of Sinhala stereotypy about Tamils. According to this stereotype, Tamils are wretchedly poor, live in filth, are uneducated, wear rags, are good coolies and breed children who are docile domestic servants.

If Estate Tamils resent the failure of the Sinhalese and the other Tamils to provide them with a distinct identity, they resent equally the names by which they are called when the others do choose to differentiate them from non-Estate Tamils. I shall bring out the nature of this resentment by briefly reviewing some of the names by which this ethnic group is called and also calls itself, considering these names against the Fregian distinction of *sense* and *reference*.

What are some of these other names? There are the few openly derogatory names such as *kallattoni* ("illicit boat-person") and *toṭṭakkattaṉ* ("plantation-jungle-man"). But my concern here is with the more "proper" names. "Indian Tamils" used to be the official, and still is the most popular unofficial, designation. But one needs to distinguish these Tamils from the 50 million Tamils of India. The former and their ancestors of two to five generations deep had never left this island of their birth; the latter never left India, the land of their birth. Therefore, the expanded "Tamils of Indian Origin" was tried. But this failed to differentiate these Tamils from the other Tamils of the island who also (even as the Sinhalese do) claim to have come to the island from the mainland, albeit, "a *very* long time ago." As a solution to this problem the even lengthier, "Tamils of Recent Indian Origin," was substituted, and subsequently contracted to the less cumbersome, "New Tamils". This, reflexively, gave the other Tamils

the appellation, "Old Tamils". In my interviews with Tamils, mostly Estate Tamils and some Jaffna Tamils, I was struck by their resistance to, and dissatisfaction with, all these labels. But their objections to these names, impelled initially by an apparent concern on their part for greater referential accuracy, unfolded to reveal a concern with the adequacy of sense. Moreover, it was with the last choice, "New" versus "Old" Tamils, that this underlying concern with sense began to separate itself out from the more superficial concern with reference.

I found it intriguing that whereas the word that troubled several of the Jaffna Tamils was "Old," most of my Estate Tamil informants were bothered by the word "New". Of course, the point of significance is that the Jaffna Tamils in question were English educated and were evaluating the words "Old" and "New" as English words. My Estate Tamil informants, by contrast, were reacting to the various connotations of the Tamil glosses for "Old"and "New". Here is a Jaffna Tamil school teacher:

> We are a new and vibrant people. Our ideas are up to date. Our thinking is modern. We are not old fashioned. Our people are not old and weary like the estate workers. . . . The future is our's. That is why we must be called "New Tamils".

Other informants were not as articulate as this school teacher but seemed to be similarly troubled by the connotation of "Old".[7] The Estate Tamils I interviewed, almost all of them mono-lingual Tamil-speakers, did not like the Tamil word for "new", *pudiya* (*tamilar*). The nature of their objections may be abstracted from the following sample of quotes:

> Tamil is always called *pandaittamil* (*which means, Tamil* [language] of old). To call one a Tamil is to call him a *pandaittamilan* (a Tamil of antiquity or the member of an ancient race).
>
> How can one call them (Jaffna Tamils) "Old Tamils?" We who come from *tamiragam* (the heart of Tamil country or Tamil Nadu) are the ones who are the true Old Tamils. Jaffna is a place that was a gift to a lutenist in the king's place. We can say of him, 'he came but yesterday'.

I shall spare you my attempts at explaining to my informants the meanings of "new" and "old" as having to do with political matters of a nation state rather than a comment on these Tamils' antiquity or lack thereof. I shall also spare you their responses which opened with "Yes but . . . ." and then returned to sentiments similar to the ones represented in the last two quotes. What became evident is Tamils' valorization of "antiquity" and their pride in (their presumed) ancient heritage. It is interesting that the sense of "old and spent", which happened to be the primary connotation of the English word "old" for several of the English-speaking Jaffna Tamils is not foregrounded in the Tamil gloss, *param*. Rather,

the sense of "antiquity" becomes salient. I shall return to this fondness for the antiquarian identity in connection with Tamils general disposition towards the past, a disposition that I shall call an obsession with *heritage*.

Continuing our quest for the name that makes the most perfect *sense* to these Tamils, we may ask, what of the name, "Estate Tamils", (*toṭṭattu tamilar*) or its equivalent, "Hill Country Tamils" (*malai nāṭṭu tamilar*), the very names that these Tamils keep using when they talk about themselves (for most of these Tamils, "Hill Country" and "Estate" are seen as semantic equivalents, since most estates are to be found on the hilly parts of Sri Lanka). Whenever it was suggested to some of the very men and women who employed this name most naturally in ordinary conversation that "Estate Tamils" be the official name by which they identify themselves, most of them objected. Again, the ground for such objections was its referential inaccuracy. "Not all of us are estate workers, and not all of us live in the hilly tea country", they said. Needless to say, there was much ambiguity about this name. On the one hand, it suggested the historical and social stigmatization they hoped to escape: on the other, they had

> developed [loyalty] towards the estates in which they and their families had worked for generations . . . . despite the humilitation, oppression and deplorable condition of living that they have suffered from within the plantation system (Bastian 1987:172).

To be sure, objections to the name, "Estate Tamils", were raised only when it was discussed in the somewhat specialized topic of appropriate nomenclature. However, it was clear that these Tamils' experience-fraught identities were defined by life on the estates. This was true even in conversations with Estate Tamils who were merchants or clerks in metropolitan towns far removed from the plantations. For this reason, I concluded that "Estate Tamil", the objections notwithstanding, was the name that made the greatest *sense*, and as will become clear, is especially appropriate with regard to the topic of this essay, "dispositions towards the past".

Finding a named identity that makes the greatest *sense*, regardless of referential accuracy, is not an end in itself. It reveals something further. It is this very identity that constitutes one half of these Estate Tamils' orientation towards the past which is what this essay is about. The other is to be found in the reasons for their objections to the adjective "new" in the name, "New Tamils". The "new", as already indicated, undermines something that all ethnic Tamils value deeply, *heritage*. Let me now turn to an elaboration of the history/heritage dichotomy.

Alberuni's Complaint

It has been observed by several scholars that Hindu India is niggardly in yielding to the "objectivist historian" the raw material needed for his craft. Alberuni put it this way:

> Unfortunately the Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things, they are very careless in relating the chronological succession of kings, and when they are pressed for information are at a loss, not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale-telling.[8]

History, as a function of linear time, marked by those distinct, non-repeating events, eludes the typical[9] historian. Events *qua* events are swallowed up by mythology, and tokens subsumed by types. Richard Salomon (1980) remarks that the "General Indian Historical Traditions" are indifferent to chronology, and in this respect stand in contrast to India's peripheral cultural traditions such as Nepal, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Assam, and even Kashmir.[10] In the heartland of India, chronology becomes significant only with the advent of Islam.

In the case of Buddhist Sri Lanka, I hazard the hypothesis that Buddhism, like Islam and Christianity, is a historical religion, marked by time, by the events of Buddha's birth and enlightenment. Consequently, Sinhala Sri Lanka has developed the kind of historical consciousness not found in Hindu (Tamil) Sri Lanka. In the Hindu Tamil and Sinhala Buddhist cases of Sri Lanka one would be hard put out to deny that, from an "objectivist" historian's point of view, there are no chronicles among the Hindu Tamils that are as compendious as the Buddhist *Mahavamsa*, *Culavamsa* and *Dipavamsa*. It is not the historical verity of these chronicles that concern me but the insistence on the part of the culture that has produced and nurtured these documents that their content is true in the sense that it can be actually or potentially verified (or falsified). This stance characterizes the entirety of Sri Lankan historical scholarship, spanning the whole range from the most sophisticated academic scholarship of a Gananath Obeyesekere (1986) or a K.M. de Silva (1981) to the writing of historians of the folk such as Cyril Mathew, Prime Minister Premadasa, or E.T. Kannangara. Scholars such as R.A.L.H. Gunawardana and W.I. Siriweera, who foreground the "merely mythic" or "hermeneutically" constructed aspects of these chronicles in their finely argued papers, are participants in the same discourse as are their nemeses.[11] One needs then to ask the further question as to whether this difference has any correspondence, causal or otherwise, in the historical consciousness of contemporary Tamils and Sinhalese of Sri Lanka.

History versus Heritage

Any student of Sri Lankan scholarship will be struck by the fact that the social sciences in general, and the disciplines of history and archaeology in particular,

are overwhelmingly represented by Sinhalese, in contrast to the natural sciences which are disproportionately represented by Jaffna Tamils.[12] This historical consciousness is not limited to Sinhalese academics writing in English and directing their writings to scholarship that extends to readers beyond Sri Lanka. The Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist hero of the early part of this century, Anagarika Dharmapala, is the best known in a line of folk scholars whose audience and readership were largely if not exclusively Sinhalese. The ex-minister, Mr Cyril Mathew, is the latest figure of prominence in this line of nationalistic historians. The present Prime Minister, Mr Premadasa, is another. Whether or not the chauvinism of many of these "historians of the folk" constitute "disciplined" history is quite beside the point. What is true is that there is, among these men, a faith that their view of the past will be supported by the past. Or even more forcefully stated, their faith is that their view of the past exists only because an objective past, and in the best of all possible worlds, an archaeologically unearthable or documentable past, exists.

During my fieldwork in Sri Lanka in 1983-84 following the major ethnic riots of the summer of 1983, I came upon a new historian of the folk in the person of the Sinhala speaking tour guide. In recent years, internal tourism has grown alongside foreign tourism. The English, German, Italian or French-speaking tour guide has his Sinhala speaking counterpart, who guides local tourists to the island's tour-worthy places, mainly the ruins of once-great kingdoms. In 1983-84, I spent several days with local groups of tourist-pilgrims who were guided around the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa by Sinhala-speaking tour guides. Over and over again, the guide would point to a ruin, a once-great palace, temple or dagoba, describe its past glory and then describe the circumstances of its decay. And time and time again, the destroyers were identified as Tamil invaders from India. A certain university professor's text book was cited as the source upon the authority of which the information was based. "This is not what I am saying. It is thus written in the book of the great professor, K.M. de Silva,"[13] he would punctuate his often lengthy and animated accounts. The effect on the tourist-pilgrims was to confirm what they had suspected all along, but confirmed with archaeological and documentary evidence. The Tamil is the enemy of the glorious past of the Sinhala people, and the Tamil is the enemy of the present as well. There is also an increasing number of Sinhala language newspapers and Sinhala pamphlets that are intensely engaged in (if not obsessed with) issues pertaining to the history of the Sinhala-Buddhist people and nation.

Nothing comparable has developed among the Tamils. In the recent call for Ilam(the separate Tamil State), Jaffna Tamil separatists have spawned publications that attempt to raise a distinctly Tamil historic consciousness with

respect to a historical Tamil nation which needs to be reestablished. But the call rings hollow, and is often contradicted by Marxist hopes for a *new* nation. Whether or not Tamils choose to establish Ilam has little to do with the fact that there was once a Tamil kingdom in the island's north. The Jaffna Tamils, the Ilamists included, do not have a strongly cultivated sense of their political history. In 1983, I asked several randomly selected high school classes, in the heart of Jaffna Tamil country, Jaffna, how many of them could write down the names of two Tamil kings of their own historic past. From a total of about 100 students, only twelve were able to name even one king. Furthermore, many of these students recalled the name of Ellāla (who of course was not a king of the Jaffna kingdom), the just Tamil king who was defeated by the Sinhala Duttugämunu. Others named the South Indian dynasties of Chera, Chola and Pandyans. I was unable to carry out a similar experiment with Sinhala school children. But in 1987, informal and random questioning of about twenty Sinhala children in the island's south revealed that not one was unable to name at least three kings. And as I had expected, the kings who were recalled most frequently were Duttugämunu (the king of the Sinhala people's "charter myth," the one who defeated the Tamil Ellāla and united the island under Sinhala – Buddhist rule, according to the Sinhala chronicles, Parākramabāhu the Great (the builder of the great irrigation Tanks and channels that are so often recalled as the glorious past that is being reclaimed now in Sri Lanka's ambitious multi-million dollar Mahaweli hydroelectric project) and Devānampiya Tissa (the first Sri Lankan king to embrace Buddhism), respectively. The Tamil childeren's unawareness of their own historical past is, to be sure, partly due to the content of the history text books assigned by the government which has consistently slighted the Tamil side of Sri Lankan history. However, it must be noted that even at the height of the 19th and early 20th century cultural renaissance, (long before the post-independent Sri Lankan started assigning textbooks), historic consciousness among the Tamils in general remained subdued (see Kailasapathy 1984). This was not so on the Sinhala Buddhist side of the same renaissance. When compared to the linguistic consciousness and the awareness of the literary and religious *heritage* of the Tamils, the consciousness of their political *history* is as dim as a candle before the sun.

In the many days that I spent with Tamil militants who were fighting for the separate state of Ilam, only once was the Tamil *historic* past invoked, and then only to yoke it to the romanticism of bourgeois Tamil politicians of the now outlawed Tamil United Liberation Front. These militants claim that the T.U.L.F. and its ilk have only recently found it expedient to recall the existence of a Jaffna kingdom merely in reaction to Sinhala hyperbole about their ancient kingdoms.

The militants are right, at least to the extent that most Jaffna Tamils are not deeply concerned about their ancient kings, kingdoms and dates. They are indifferent to such a history, especially to its chronology. By contrast, the invocation of Hindu religious and Tamil cultural heritage of dance, literature, architecture and sculpture was not considered bourgeois even by these revolutionaries.

There are other ways of formulating this distinction between the Sinhala and Tamil views of the past. It may be seen as one between political history and cultural history, or objectivist history and transcendental history. Even if these formulations are reasonable, they are so only because they are underwritten, as it were, by two distinct stances toward to the past. What these Tamils and the greater Indian cultural traditions share is more a consciousness of the present, one's present heritage of the past, than of the past as past. "History" is one thing, "heritage" another. the one is sharply defined and clearly instantiated, even if only in the imagination; the other is a vague, though rich, potentiality.

A Semeiotic Formulation of the Distinction

In formal semeiotic terms, the Peirceian distinction between dicisigns (or dicent signs) and rhematic signs may help us see the difference being drawn here with greater clarity. Dicisigns are signs whose effects are seen to have been *actualized*. *Signs* of the Ṣinhala past, the Buddha's visit to the island for instance, are seen as actualized events; quite literally in his footprint on Sri Pāda. The reality of Parākramabāhu the Great is found in his irrigation tanks. Heritage, by contrast, is a semeiotic rheme. Whereas dicisigns are, to the community of believers, signs of actual fact (the factitiousness of these facts notwithstanding, a separate issue which I shall not take up here), a rheme is not a sign of actuality but one of possibility. Peirce compares a rheme (he also calls it a *term*, or *rahema*) to a proposition with a blank for its subject (2.95).[14]

> If parts of a proposition be erased so as to leave *blanks* in their places, and if these blanks are of such a nature that if each of them be filled by a proper name the result will be a proposition then the blank form of the proposition which was first produced by the erasure is termed a *rheme* (2.272).

Or again, "A [rheme] is a sign which leaves its Object, and *a fortiori* its Interpretant, to be what it *may*" (emphasis added; 2.95). As a semeiotic rheme, "heritage" is a sign of possibility, which needs no actualization to make it real and which no number of actualizations can exhaust. With history as a dicisign, one begins with the idea that without a past to realize there would not be a historical consciousness; with heritage as a rheme, one begins with the idea that without a historical consciousness there would not be a historical past. The former describes Sinhala disposition towards the past, the latter, that of the Tamils.

Furthermore, dicisigns strive to particularize or concretize,[15] rhemes tend to synthesize and primordialize. Both are activities of "making real", realiz*ation*. But particularization, true to its dual meanings of "part" (as opposed to whole) and "particle" (as in *concrete* particle), entails a search for objects in which "meanings" can be incarnated and the world fragmented at one and the same time. It is in this sense then that historiography has been burdened with the need to concretize. Its objects are documents and monuments, both of which are amply "discoverable" in Buddhist Sri Lanka. The historian and the historically minded people become the subjects who *see* these objects.[16] Primordialization, in the rhematic sense in which I use the word, is both holistic and non-dualistic; its verity is affirmed, not in any particular object or objectivity, but in a lived-experience of intersubjective *being*.

Heritage with History

The foregoing discussion and distinction between what I have called history, on the one hand, and heritage, on the other, should not be taken as meaning that a people who hold to one view of the past are incapable of the other. Rather, the Tamil-Sinhala contrasts are to be taken as general and strong propensities rather than as mutual exclusivities.[17]

While the Jaffna Tamil, following the general Indian pattern, favours "heritage", and the Sinhalese favour "history", the Estate Tamils' view of the past can be apperceived as a palpable dialectic entailing heritage and history.

Like their Jaffna Tamil counterparts, and as revealed in their objection to being called "New Tamils", Estate Tamils think of themselves as an ancient people belonging to an ancient civilization with an ancient heritage. However, these Tamils see their claim to this great heritage to be openly monopolized by the Jaffna Tamils. The agents who remind them of this monopoly are the school teachers, who have been (until recently) predominantly these "Other Tamils". These teachers are the ones who introduced the Estate Tamil child to Classical Tamil literature, in a modern dialect of Tamil. This dialect of Tamil, which is alien to the student, is called *centamir* (elegant Tamil) by the teacher while he simultaneously brands the Tamil spoken by his Estate Tamil students, *kodun-tamir* (coarse or corrupt Tamil).[18]

In Sri Lankan schools, Religion is a mandatory subject. Here too, it is the Jaffna Tamil teacher who teaches and prepares the Estate Tamil school children for their examination in Hinduism. The brand of Hinduism taught is Saiva Siddhanta which Jaffna Tamils claim to have preserved and nurtured in its purity and not allowed to go the way of Saivism in Tamil Nadu. Estate Hinduism is coarse: a "little tradition", according to one Jaffna Tamil informant, who has

read some anthropology (see also Coomaraswamy 1987:84-85). Here again, the sacred trust of the great tradition is a matter of heritage, not mere history.

In this regard we may note that the Jaffna Tamils' conceit about his dialect of Tamil or of Saiva Siddhanta is comparable to the Sinhala Buddhists' belief that they have been entrusted by Lord Buddha to preserve and defend Buddhism in its pristine form against all threats of latter day corruption. The difference, however, is a crucial one. Sinhala Buddhists hold the entrusting of Buddhism in their hands to have been an actualized event; the Jaffna Tamils see themselves as living embodiments of a tradition ((linguistic and religious) that no mere event initiated and which no mere event could end. They, as a people, like the dialect of Tamil they claim to speak and the religion they practice, are timeless, with neither beginning nor end.

There is one aspect of the Estate Tamils's heritage that has not been alienated from him; an aspect that he feels has not been colonized by the Jaffna Tamil. This consists of poetry, song, drumming and the art of story-telling. I shall call this the bardic heritage. This bardic heritage has two extensions; one in time, and the other in space. The temporal extension goes back to the great Tamil poet of the early Christian era, Tiruvalluvar. While all Tamils proudly lay claim to Tiruvalluvar as *their* poet, and many love citing the Rev. G.U. Pope (1886) who introduced his English translation of the *Tirukkural* by describing its greatness as having no parallel in any other language, it is the Parayans, the untouchable caste of drummers, who lay special claim to this famous poet. They consider Tiruvalluvar as their very own ancestor. To this day, the priests of Parayans are called *Valluvars*. And as any fieldworker is bound to find out in short order, Tamil Estate and especially Tamil life owes its musicality – its songs of work and wailing, its rhythm of drums and dance, its tales of ups and downs – to the Parayans (see, for example, Egnor 1986:294-344). In the words of a popular quatrain sung by a Parayan:

> Kallans have power
> Vellalans have wealth
> Pallans have revenge
> Parayans have song[19]
> (*kallanukku pavarirukku*
> *vellalanukkuppanamirukku*
> *pallanukkuppaliirukku*
> *parayanuukkuppattirukku*)

If the temporal line of this bardic heritage extends to Tiruvalluvar, its spatial extension moves inward touching each individual's innermost being with the clarity of felt immediacy. And what is more, in this inward extension, *heritage*

intersects with *history*, to be nourished by a common experience.

This history is not a history of "long ago". It is a history of "just yesterday". It is not a finished chapter that may be reopened at will, looked at, reexperienced if wished, and reclosed; it is still being "written". It is not an abstract history nor a history of abstractions; it is anchored in experience, the experience of suffering. And this history is constituted by a "root metaphor" (Pepper 1942; Turner 1974), the metaphor of labour (*uraippu*) (see Velupillai 1970).

In the following two sections I shall attempt to illustrate this dialectical play between the elements of heritage and those of history as they are constituted in labour and pain. In the first section, I provide a synoptic sketch in the voice of a *typical* oral historian. In the second section I provide a self-consciously constructed *Peoples' Legend* by one of the best known Estate Tamil writers, the late C.V. Velupillai. On the face of it the first section may appear to carry the flag of history and the second that of heritage. But within each of them, as within the discourses that bear them, the dialectical play between historical consciousness and the consciousness of heritage is densely enacted.

Suffering: A Catalogue

This is how the typical account runs:[20]

> Two years after Sri Wickrama Rajasingam, the last Kandyan King,[21] was deposed by the British (in 1815)[22] the first group of labourers was brought to *kandi* from India. The first to come were all men. They came not to work on plantations but to build roads and railroad.[23] These were the men who built the Colombo-Kandy road. These men were hired by the British Government. They were hired, not from India's villages but from her towns. Unlike villagers, these men were without kin; mere drifters; without discipline (*Kaṭṭuppāḍu*; from the root, *kaṭṭu* – to bind or restrain, and *pāḍu* – suffering: thus, to voluntarily suffer or subject one's self to restraint.) It is said that many of them died from diseases in those early days. But they were free to return India whenever they liked. And many who survived, did. Some stayed on. The British government also brought Indians who could read, write and knew arithmetic to work in the civil service. They too came from towns and cities. They came mainly from Madras and Cochin. Many of these people brought their families and stayed. Their descendents became the *Colombe Kochchis*. Some of these *Colombe Kochchis* deny that they are Indian, and have, in recent riots, burned Tamil businesses and homes.[24]
>
> A few years after Sri Wickrama Rajasingam returned to India to live there in exile, there were many famines in India.[25] In those days, English planters gave *kanganis*[26] money to take labourers from our villages to clear the

jungles of Sri Lanka and plant coffee. That is how our forefathers came to Sri Lanka to clear the jungle and plant coffee. In the beginning those who came here were mostly men. Later, especially when tea replaced coffee, entire families came to the island together. Many died of disease before they even reached the mountains. Some died in the sea when their boats capsized in a monsoon storm. Others died *en route* in the dense jungles of the northeastern and northcentral provinces. While Parayan musicians beat their drums to keep the wild animals away, a few bold men went ahead to survey the jungles and plan how, when and where to set fires.

The wild boar and the leopard
Died in the forest fire.

(From a ballad recorded by C.V. Velupillai [1970:35]

The others cut down the jungle, making a road all the way from Mannar to Anuradhapura, and from there to Kandy.

Some died of cholera, typhoid, smallpox and malaria. Some were eaten by wild animals. They cut more roads through the jungle from Kandy all the way up to Nuwara Eliya and then to Bandarawela, Badulla and down to the south to the sea. The Sinhalese did not work on these roads because they feared the jungles. They stuck to their villages. Furthermore, they were lazy.[27]

In 1827 the white man planted coffee. That was when most of our ancestors came.[28] First only men came. Since coffee was a crop in which the demand for labour was seasonal, our forefathers thought that they could return to India every year after the seasonal work was done. The *kanganis* and the white *dorais* (bosses) led us to believe that this was how it was going to be. At first we were given a small "advance" by the *kangani*. He got this money from the white man. But he told our fathers that this was his own money, advanced to them out of the kindness of his heart, which they could return, whenever convenient, with a small interest. But they devised a ruse to force us to stay. After the season was over and the work done, they delayed our payment. The dorai did this to save himself the trouble of having to look for a new set of labourers the following year. The dorai's *story* was the same, every year, year after year.

Let me now parenthetically shift from our *typical narrator's voice* to my own in order to expand upon what the narrator has called the *dorai's story* by turning to its expression in a work song. This song was sung for me in the Indian village of Naganallur in the Tiruchirappalli district of Tamil Nadu by a man who was repatriated under Sirimavo-Shastri Indo-Sri Lankan Pact of 1967. He and his ancestors had worked on Blackwater Estate in the Ambegamuwa area. This is how the song goes:

Mr. Mackenzie, Mr. Mackenzie where is our pay?
Marimuttu, Marimuttu, have you seen the prices fall?
Mr. Wright, Mr. Wright, where is our pay?
Rengamuttu, Rengamuttu I am going to buy another coffee estate.

Mr. Smith, Mr. Smith where is our pay?
Sinnasamy, Sinnasamy, come back next year.
Mr. Kangany, Mr. Kangany where is our pay?
Oh Karmam, oh Karmam, the first half the bugs ate
The second is paying up the interest you owe.

This little song which I collected in 1975, I had relegated to a box labeled "Fieldnotes: miscellaneous scraps" until last year when I came across the following note in an appendix in K.M. de Silva (1965):

> In his evidence before the Parliamentary Committee on Ceylon, 2nd report on Ceylon 1850 (p 303) the Ceylon planter George Ackland showed that on a single day in 1840 the following Civil Servants bought 13,275 acres (5376 ha) of land in the Ambagamuwa District (Central Province).
>
The Rt. Hon. J. S. Mackenzie, Governor	1,120 acres
The Hon. W.O. Carr (Puisine Justice) and Captain Skinner (Commissioner of Roads)	862 acres
F.B. Norris (Survey-General) and others	762 acres
G. Turnour (Governor Agent, Central Province, and at that time Acting Colonial Secretary)	2,217 acres
H. Wright (District Judge, Kandy) and G. Bird	1,715 acres
Sir R. Arbuthnot (Commander of the Forces) and Capt. Winslow (A.D.C.)	855 acres
T. Oswin, Esq. (District Judge)	545 acres
C.R Buller(later Government Agent, Central Prov.)	764 acres
Capt. Layard and others	2,204 acres
P.E. Wodehouse (Government Agent and Assistant Colonial Secretary	2,135 acres
	13, 275 acres

It is most intriguing that two of the names that appear in the song also appear in the above list, and that these purchases were in the Ambegamuwa district, the district within which Blackwater Estate is located. My research in the Public Records Office in London and in the archives in Colombo have not turned up any evidence directly implicating Governor Mackenzie and District Judge Wright in the non-payment or delayed payment of wages to the labourers who worked on their estates. Nor have I been able to find any songs which include any other names from the above list. "Smith" is in the song and not on this list. Perhaps he was too minor a figure for George Ackland's purposes. There also seems to be a chronological problem in the songs. If the reference to the bug that had eaten the coffee plant is an allusion to the great and final coffee blight of the late 1870s, that would place all these events with their charges and excuses forty odd years after the massive purchases of land described in Ackland's list. Then again, the reference could have been to an earlier minor crop disease. However,

if indeed this were true of these highest of officials in colonial Ceylon it would be one of the severest indictments of British colonial exploitation of estate Tamil labourers. Nonetheless, it remains true that planters of that period reaped several benefits from these irregular, delayed and infrequent payments of wages. As Wesamperama notes, "the underlying factor for the planters preference for infrequent payment was the shortage of working capital which the coffee planters experienced" (1986:194). Mackenzie's excuse does have some basis in fact. Coffee prices were notorious for their dips and rises. But if "working capital" extended to entail investment capital as well, as the charge against "Mr. Wright" in the song seems to indicate, then it is clear that white planters expanded their land holdings on the backs of unpaid labourers; the wages due them went directly into buying more estates. Returning to the voice of our narrator we find the *kangani* supported this policy of delayed payments for even more diabolical reasons.

> It forced us to turn again to the *kangani* for the means of our livelihood. So, the first year's payment would be paid only at the beginning of the next year's work season. By then our forefathers were so deep in debt that they never even saw the color of these wages. It was directly deducted from their accounts by the *kangani*. They continued to work the next season so that they could go back home with some earnings. But that never happened. What happened at the end of the first year was repeated after the second, the third, and the fourth year. Then it became the custom. Each year, our forefathers got themselves deeper and deeper into debt; and each year our forefathers, entire annual wages had to be used to repay loans and interest to the *kangani*.
>
> Thus the following song:
>
> Speak not of Kandy to me;
> Nor repeat its name.
> For in that casteless Kandy
> The cobbler is the kangany[29]
>
> (C.V. Velupillai 1970:34)
>
> To this day, many of us are in debt to those *kanganis* and their children; some of us continuing the old debt-obligation in village India to where we have returned under the various repatriation schemes. Some managed to break this vicious cycle early on by determinedly returning to India empty-handed, along the same treacherous route. Others went into further debt to bring their wives and children to join them and their labour.
>
> Then in 1878 the coffee blight happened in Sri Lanka. Many white planters abandoned their land and their debts to us and left. For three years our people died of starvation.
>
> In yonder field
> Strung with pegs
> Where coffee plants sprout
> I lost my beloved brother.
>
> (C.V.Velpuillai 1970:35)

Then came tea. We were re-hired. More of our people were brought from India. More people came to Kandy from India in the year Queen Victoria died than in any other year.[30] This time as many women and children as men were brought to the hills, since plucking tea is a woman's job, weeding around the tea bushes a child's job, and both women and children were paid less than were men.

The Sinhalese in the villages bordering the estates where we worked brought us breadfruit, honey, juggery and arrack. We shared our rations of rice, sugar and dhal with them. We also paid them in rupees and cents. They did not understand money and preferred payment in kind. When it comes to money, the Kandyan Sinhalese villager is easily cheated, even to this day. Small traders from the low country set up shops in the hill towns alongside those set up by our Vellalas, Chettiars, and gold smiths. These low country Sinhalese cheated Kandyan Sinhalese whenever an exchange in money was involved. Some of our people laughed at their simpleness behind their backs, along with the low country Sinhalese merchant. Others taught the Kandyan villager how not to be cheated and how to count his change. In those days, fights between Sinhalese and us were rare. You will hear of an occasional story of how one of our men was threatened by a group of Sinhalese villagers. Some times it was the Kandyan Sinhalese attacking us for not warning them against the low country cheaters; and at others it was a low country Sinhala merchant or his hired thugs attacking us for informing the Kandyan peasant that this *mudalali* (shop owner) or that was cheating them. Of course the peasant laughed at us, and we at them. They, at our language; we at how they sowed their rice paddy fields without plan nor purpose. But on the whole we had little to do with them, except when some of our people went with some of theirs to Kadirgamam. It was the white man and the *kangani* that we either liked or hated. They are the ones who worked us, beat us, underfed, under-paid and under-housed us, and cheated us; and sometimes were kind. And if ours was a good *kangani* or a kind *dorai*[31] we were proud of him.

Of all the dorais in the land
OUR dorai is the court dorai.
The court dorai is a tough man,
Get off the road, here he comes.[32]

(C.V. Velupillai 1970:38)

After one hundred years, the white man gave all the people of this land the right to vote, including us. The others did not like this. "They are foreigners," they said of us. "They earn money here and send it back to their villages in India." Only the Chettiars and some Motta Vellala *kanganis* had enough money to send back to India. They, along with the Borahs and the *Bhais*[33] had enough money to buy the right to vote and the right to be citizens. They bank rolled the politicians and the white planters.[34]

In 1920 all the people of Sri Lanka, including the Estate Tamils, were given the right to vote. Ten years later (1931) they took that right from many of us by introducing new and stricter eligibility requirements. Only those who

possessed a Certificate of Permanent Settlement were allowed to vote. And anyone who had gone back to India within the previous five years for a visit was not allowed to be a citizen. In spite of this there were 100,000 Estate Tamils who voted. This, the Sinhalese did not like. So they made the requirement stricter yet. A voter had to be literate in Sinhala, Tamil or English. But at the same time they would not allow our children the privilege of schools. They did not even provide a creche where our women could leave their infants and toddlers when they went to the fields. Nowadays there are creches, but the "teacher" at these creches is a Sinhalese woman who does not even know Tamil. A voter had to own more than Rs. 500 of immovable property or he had to earn Rs. 50 or more per month. These requirements were made only of us Estate Tamils. Then they said that we had to prove that we had a permanent interest in this country. So in 1936 they made the rule tighter for us while at the same time allowing white men who came and went as they pleased and always returned to England, to vote. And all the Burghers who eventually went to Australia were allowed to vote. We who did not even have money to buy a train ticket to Talai Mannar to take the ferry to India even if we wanted to were deemed not to have a permanent interest in the island. In spite of this, more and more of us qualified to vote.[35] So they made the rules tighter yet in 1940. And still there were one and half lakhs among us who were qualified to vote.[36] And what did the Jaffna Tamils do? They did not care about us most of the time. C. Suntharalingam[37] was the brain behind everything that D.S. Senanayake did including our eventual disenfranchisement after independence. G.G. Ponnanmbalam briefly showed interest in our problem only when he thought that it might help his Tamils too.[38] Then came the elections after the War. We elected seven Indian Congress members and seven leftist members to parliament.[39] This scared the Sinhalese capitalists, the Jaffna Tamil capitalists, and the British capitalists, So they took away our citizenship and then our right to vote. This was planned with the British. People who know about these matters more than we do tell us that every word that was uttered during the independence-negotiations between Senanayake and the British were written down. If this be so they must surely have talked about us who made up 13% of this country's population. But they tell us that there is no record of a single word about us. How is it that we who mattered so much before election since 1920 didn't even warrant mention when independence was discussed? The records are either hidden or destroyed. For if they are found it will reveal a conspiracy; a conspiracy to prevent the leftists from coming to power. Then in 1967 Bandaranayake and Shastri decided, without consulting us, how India and Ceylon were going to divide us. They arbitrarily decided that 525,000 of us were to be sent back to India, to where we had come from 150 years earlier and 300,000 were to be given Ceylon citizenship but whose names will appear on a separate registry. We were to be marked. This left 150,000 whose fate was undecided.

The horror tales that we hear from those who have gone to India are worse than anything we could tell you about our sojourn in Sri Lanka. We are

cheated off our meagre possessions even before we leave the estates. The estate office clerks and some Sinhala superintendents extract bribes from us in order to release our papers and provident funds. But this is usually minor. These people know how poor we are. But matters get really bad at the Indian High Commission in Kandy or Colombo. There the clerks try to relieve us of as much jewellery and cash as they possibly can. But nothing is as bad as when we land in India. Here there is justice. Over there there is only injustice. The Sinhalese attack us only during the periodic riots. Our own Tamils in India attack us everyday in countless ways. From the customs officers who treat us like cattle, to the porters, the tasildars, the bank clerks, and finally our own relatives – of whom we have only heard vague stories about from our grandparents – all exploit us; not just our material wealth but even our labour. Many of us have become bonded labourers,[40] many others have become beggars in the cities of Madurai and Madras. It is said that some of our women have even turned to prostitution.

The whole of the above account, especially that of the post-disenfranchisement and post-repatriation years, is a highly abbreviated one. But what may be keenly felt in this account is a historical consciousness; history in the making as it were.

Now let us turn to an account that emphasizes heritage, but heritage with a uniquely historical twist.

Born of Labor

What follows is the sketch of a story obtained from the late C.V. Velupillai in my last interview with him, in 1984, two years before his death.[41] He wished to call it, *malayagattamilar puranam* (The Legend or Story of up-country heartland Tamils).

"Her name was Tamil.[42] She was the most beautiful woman (*pen*) in the world. Her other name was Mother Tamil (*tamir tai*),[43] she was the only daughter of Siva, "the apple of his eye (*Sivamani*)." One day when she was thirsty, she came to a sea of milk. Delighted, she quenched her thirst in it. It was the sea that Lord Vishnu had churned. She did not know this. And she became pregnant. Lord Siva, filled with rage at his daughter, cursed her to go into painful labor. And her children and their children's children were also cursed to labor all their lives. After much anguish and pain she gave birth to a daughter and then died like many of our women die during labor to this very day. Siva Peruman was deeply saddened. He held out to his grand daughter one of the spears left behind by his son, Murugan (also called Skanda), and told her to give it to her sons. "It belongs to your mother's brother (*tai maman*). Tell your sons to follow him to the land that he has gone to.[44] And let your daughters follow your sons. In that land there will be a bush. It will have spread so as to cover much of that land. Tell your sons to use this *ayudam* (means both weapon and instrument or tool) and your daughters their bare hands to harvest every last leaf from this bush and thereby make that land prosper. After the last leaf has been harvested, my

son Murugan will come to claim his *ayudam*. Then your curse shall be lifted." As soon as his grand daughter received the spear, its tip bent, and one of its sides became the sharpest of blades, changing the whole into a *kavvattu katti* (the curved knife used for pruning tea bushes). "This is our symbol (*cinnam*): a *kavvattu katti* and the *koruntu* (the two tea leaves and a bud from which tea is manufactured). **At this point Mr Velupillai showed me a sketch of the symbol** –But of course there is that curse where the pain of labor in childbirth (*prasava vedanai*) continues in the pain of labor (*uraippu vanai*) among the bushes on the mountains of the tea estates.[45] But that, as Sivaperuman said, will end only when every last tea leaf has been plucked. But the *kavvatu katti* prunes a bush, and the more one prunes a bush the more luxuriantly leaves grow. "This is the crux of our life's problem". How will this end? How will the curse be lifted? How will every last leaf be nipped off? "That is our secret. It will happen." And when it does, we will go to Kadirgamam. And there we will give Murugan his knife. "And what do you think will happen?"

Expecting Siva's boon to be fulfilled according to plan, I said, "It will turn back into a spear!" Mr Velupillai laughed and picked up the picture of the symbol of Estate Tamils he had sketched. "No,! It will turn into this." And he sketched over the outlines of the knife, extending the tip into the shape of a sickle, in whose arc remained three leaves and a bud.

I must restrain myself for now from the temptation of subjecting this *puranam* to the variety of mythological analyses it is capable of being subjected to, including the one that perennially fascinates anthropologists, the subject of "incest". But I cannot resist myself from raising at least several small points of curious significance. The ancestress, Mother Tamil, is called a woman (presumably human). But she turns out to be the daughter of Siva and the sister of Skanda (therefore, a goddess). But if she were a goddess, she does not fit either one of the two types of South Indian Saiva goddesses, Consort Goddesses and Virgin Goddesses, who remain unimpregnatable virgins (see Ramanujan 1986:55-64). Her death is described in human terms. (Perhaps it was a function of its having been but a sketch). Giving birth vaginally, though known in Hinduism (especially Vaishnavism) is not the most common form of divine deliveries. Mr Velupillai was educated in a Christian school. Could that have had some bearing on his *puranam*? Could this, combined with his leftist politics, also have made him end the myth in the somewhat "sacrilegious" manner he did end it, with the last word not going to Siva or the spear to Murugan but to an implied revolutionary struggle and/or victory by and for his people? Then there is always that question of the typicality of a tale and the idiosyncrasy of an informant such as this. Space does not allow me to respond to the latter in any great detail, except to make the following observations:

(1) Mr. Velupillai sees himself as a descendent of Tiruvalluvar. Both belong to the Valluvan sub-caste of Parayans. Tiruvalluvar is seen as a *historical* figure, and an *individual*. The two are complementary since history makes individuals and individuals (persons and events) make history.

(b) Mr Velupillai, in self-consciously authoring a *puranam*, is both asserting his individuality and engaging in a practice that runs against the grain of Brahmanic Hinduism where authors of *puranams* are never historical individuals.

(c) At the same time, in seeing himself as a token of a type, as a twentieth century Valluvar, he is negating his individuality as well as his historicity. The emphasis is on *heritage*.

In conclusion (and not a recapitulation), I wish to suggest that Estate Tamils are people both in and of history; not condemned to be moored to permanent cultural ideologies and ontologies, or any such Durkheimian *moral orders*.[46] Even as Estate Tamils are different from Jaffna Tamils and Sinhalese, they have also come to be different from the Tamils of the mainland whom they left fifty to a hundred and fifty years ago.

✦

NOTES

This paper, with respect to tea estate workers in particular, is based on fieldwork carried out in the years: 1971, 1974, 1976, 1983-84, 1987. The *oral histories* I employ are biased towards the pre-1983 years and towards older informants. Much has changed since 1983, deserving a separate treatment.

[1] Unfortunately, space does not allow me to develop this point in this essay.

[2] See K M de Silva (1986:183) for a discussion of early federalist proposals which would have given the Kandyan Sinhala region an identity of its own, distinct from that of the Low Country Sinhalese.

[3] In Gadamer's formulation, "the standpoint that is beyond any standpoint . . . is pure illusion" (1975:339). Obviously then, the standpoint in this paper is my own, that of a trained anthropologist. However, I have attempted to privilege the world as seen by this second group of Tamils because it is their's that gets the least recognition in writings on ethnic relations in Sri Lanka while the other two groups argue about the objectivity of their own perspectives. It is hoped that this privileging of a "neglected viewpoint" in the manner of a comparative anthropology will place the other points of view, including the "disinterested" analyst's, in a more enlightening perspective.

[4] In the late-colonial and particularly in the post-independence context such shiftings of identities are seen as opportunism, especially by the Tamils who stand to lose the most by the Muslims' renouncing of their Tamil-linguistic identity. Alternatively it may also be argued that such "Muslim-strategies" represent the vestige of a common pre-colonial practice where neither linguistic chauvinism nor linguistic nationalism prevailed. By this argument, the English language did not unite the various language groups but initiated the beginning of their mutually antagonistic separation. This phenomenon may be more clearly seen in several regions of India. The case of the break up of the former Madras Presidency into Tamil Nadu and Telangana is such a revealing example. There, before the dominance of the English set in, intermarriage between Tamil and Telugu speakers within the same *jati* was quite common.

[5] See Tarzie Vittachi (1958). The most recent, post-1983 intervention by India in Sri Lanka's problems goes beyond the justification of protecting Indian or potentially Indian citizens.

[6] It cannot be denied that all the luminaries involved in the 19th and 20th century Tamil cultural revival were concentrated in Jaffna; and it was a remarkable concentration indeed (see Russell 1982:135).

[7] To be sure, most of my Jaffna Tamil informants thought "Old" suited them perfectly and gave the word the same connotation given to it by the Estate Tamils (as meaning "ancient" rather than "spent"). But the exceptions in this case are more revealing than the rule.

[8] *Alberuni's India* tr. Edward Sachau (London 1888), Vol. II pp. 10-11: cited in "A New View of the Problem of Ancient Indian History". I thank Richard G Salomon (1980) for bringing this to my attention.

[9] The more recent hermeneutic turn, after Dilthey and especially Gadamer, has, by foregrounding the interpretive nature of all historiography, pulled out from under the "objectivist history" the rug of innocent conceit upon which he stood and presumed that what he was after were facts *qua* facts and events *qua* events, unstained by the subjective presen(t) ce. However, what I have called the "typical historian" continues to exercise his craft much as if hermeneutics had not budged from its classical form.

[10] See A K Warder's *An Introduction to Indian Historiography* for a general introduction to these various historical traditions.

[11] On this point also see Bruce Kapferer (1987). For an excellent account of the amount of passion invested in defending or attacking the "historicity" of the Mahavamsa see Serena Tennekoon (1987).

[12] A casual bibliographic entry count of the Sinhala:Tamil ratio of historians gave me a figure of 15:1.

[13] It is telling that our ultra-nationalist tour guide's historian himself was to be subsequently called a "traitor historian" by a more powerful group of Sinhala nationalists in Colombo because

de Silva had claimed that only four Sinhala kings had ruled the entire island (Tennekoon 1987:4 and 8).

[14] All references to Peirce employs the conventional volume and paragraph number from his *Collected Papers*.

[15] In a recent article, Andrew Lass (1988) uses "concretization" into monuments in the uses of history by 19th century Czech nationalism. However, there are some epistemological differences between Lass's phenomenological framework and my semeiotic one; differences into which I shall not go in this paper.

[16] Bruce Kapferer (1987) holds that "fragmentation" in a Buddhist State is threatening, is fraught with evil, and is the antithesis of a hierarchical and holistic (Buddhist) state. By its very nature then, historiography, being a "particularizing" (potentially or actually fragmenting) activity runs counter to the constitution of a sound Buddhist state. In other words, if Kapferer is correct, in the Buddhist State's very *historicity* lies the seeds of his own contradiction.

[17] A sense of heritage does have a place in Sinhala consciousness, and history, in that of Tamils. However, the biases are real and are to be recognized. In my opinion, Bruce Kapferer's claim that "for Sinhalese the past is always in the present and the person is inseparable from history, the person and history (forming) a cosmic unity" (1987:213), is only partly correct, and to that extent is truer of the Hindu Tamil disposition toward the past than that of the Sinahla Buddhist. What makes the Buddhist Sinhala disposition different from the Hindu-Indian one and similar to the European one is what I have chosen to emphasize here: the past *qua* past as the independent variable, and its presence in the present as the dependent variable. The Sinhalese are more like Kapferer's Australians ("given to placing history outside themselves" (1987:214) than are the Tamils. For example, several Tamils have entered the debate on the historical verity of this or the other fact pertaining both to Sinhala past as well as establishing "facts" of their own past (see Ponnambalam 1985 and Satyendra 1985). The debate is carried out in discursive terms that are identical to those employed by the other side (see Coomaraswamy 1987).

[18] I have been surprised on more than one occasion when trained Jaffna Tamil sociolinguists have equated the "prestige" of the Jaffna dialect (a prestige, by the way, that is limited only to Sri Lankan Tamil speakers) with "linguistic purity". If an analogue be needed, one might liken the Jaffna case to the Appalachian community that was discovered some years ago by linguists who found them to have retained a remarkable number of elements from Elizabethan English, elements which have been lost in contemporary standard English. Imagine these Appalachians to claim that their English is "pure" and the rest "corrupt", then you'll have the Appalachian counterpart of the Jaffna Tamil claim. I consider this presumption to linguistic purity not a mere measure of the degree to which this conceit has been domesticated among these Tamils, but as an index of the degree to which *heritage* as a phenomenon has been naturalized in this culture.

[19] The leader of the biggest trade union of plantation workers, Mr S Thondaman, belongs to the Kallan caste. He has been a cabinet minister in the UNP government since 1977.

[20] The following oral history has been constructed by drawing from over twenty five oral historical accounts gathered in the field. I have rendered this typical oral history in a block quote because, save for syntactic editorial insertions, the account provided is a composite of actual quotes from informants.

All of my "oral historians" are, or were at some time, residents of tea estates or small towns in the Kandy, Nuwara Eliya and Badulla districts. Some aspects of these oral accounts do not find redundant corroboration in written accounts, while others do. This does not mean that the former is true only if corroborated by the latter. Unless contrary versions turn up (in which case one may try to find good reasons for choosing one over the other), I take a lack of redundancy as merely indicating indifference by the creators of such documents to those aspects of laborious experience which do figure in oral histories. Wherever feasible, however, I have provided references wherein such oral histories are corroborated by documented histories. I do so, not to presume verification, but to provide the reader directions for further research. Furthermore, my failing to provide a documentary counterpart in every instance is not to be taken as the non-existence of such documentation.

[21] Estate Tamils never pronounce this last Kandyan king's name the Sinhala way (i.e., *sans* the terminal 'm'), implicitly making the point that he was a Tamil monarch.

[22] Whenever calendar years are given in parentheses it indicates that oral accounts do not, in general, specify such years.

[23] In fact, the railways were to come much later, in mid-century.

[24] Recall the characterization of these people's ancestors as "drifters", implying thereby that anyone with a deep and connected network of kinfolk could never forget their true identities. Strong identities entailed *kattuppāṭu*.

[25] The following were the years in the 19th century when the Madras Presidency was most affected by famine: 1802-04, 1806-07, 1823, 1832-33, 1838-43, 1853-55, 1876-78, and 1896-97 (see Lovejoy, 1914) and 1899 (see Ludden, 1985:194-95).

[26] A *kaṅgāṇi* was a recruiter cum leader of labor-gangs, a very powerful and important figure in the lives of Estate Tamil workers. At the peak of his power, both white planters and Tamil laborers were extremely dependent on him. From the white man he could withdraw labour at critical times, and from the laborer he could withhold payment almost at will with impunity (see Wesumperuma 1986, *passim*).

[27] This is contrary to fact. Sinhalese did work on clearing the jungles (see Wesumperuma 1986:9).

That the Sinhalese are indolent is a belief widely subscribed to by all Tamils of Sri Lanka, and even by many Sinhalese. This baseless opinion (in my well studied judgement) is in itself deserving of further study, as a cultural artifact. It is interesting to note, however, that the "indolence" in question occurs in two distinct discursive arrangements. For the Tamils, it occurs within the discourse of hard and efficient work. For the Sinhalese who hold this view, it is a matter of hierarchy and who can and cannot afford such indolence. The Europeans in Sri Lanka and the Europeanized Sri Lankans (such as present-day tea planters) are among the greatest perpetrators of the myth of the indolent Sinhalese.

[28] Most probably, the immigration of Indian labor to the island peaked in the 19th century, not in 1827, but in 1889. However, arriving at an accurate figure with the available statistics is extremely difficult (see Wesumperuma, ch. 3).

[29] The cobbler *(Chakkilian)* is the lowest in the caste hierarchy. A disordered society is compared to a "casteless" society, which is the same as one in which the cobbler is the *kaṅgāṇi*.

[30] I have not located the records for 1903, the year Queen Victoria died. But according to Ferguson's directory, the first decade of the century marks the heaviest net increase of Indian immigrant labor (442, 786 individuals), broadly in support of the oral account.

[31] The title given to the superintendent (until recently, most often, a Briton) of an estate.

[32] Nowadays the women and men of tea estates are embarrassed and resentful of such subservience of their fathers and mothers. The current militant mood does not indulge in any such sentiment towards anybody, including the other two ethnic groups who have traditionally held estate workers in bemused contempt.

[33] Bhais are Sindhi money-lenders whose reputation for enforcing a verbal contract between his borrower and himself with tactics of terror is legendary in the hill country of Sri Lanka.

[34] Several members of the Motta Vellālā or Āru Nattu Vellāla caste have become wealthy merchants and industrialists both in Śri Laṅka and India. The Nattukottai Chettiars were the merchant bankers of Sri Lanka and rice merchants on whom the early English planter depended heavily (See D. Wesumperuma 1986: 165-170; 296-299 and W. S. Weerasooriya 1973).

[35] S. U. Kodikara (1965 p. 79) puts the number of Indian Tamils registered as voters at 143,000 in 1936 and 235,000 in 1939.

[36] Indeed, the figure had dropped to 168,000 by 1943.

[37] A Jaffna Tamil, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Ceylon, politician, and advisor to Sri Lanka's first Sinhala Prime Minister, Mr. D. S. Senanayake.

[38] G. G. Ponnambalam, a brilliant Tamil politican-lawyer, founder of the Tamil Congress party and an eloquent defender of Jaffna Tamil rights, was to subsequently accept a cabinet portfolio in the Senanayake government. This was seen by Estate as well an many Jaffna Tamils as an act

of selling one's birthright for a mess of potage (see K. M. de Silva 1986: 106, for an even more cynical view of Ponnambalam).

[39] P. Devaraj, citing H. Wriggins and A. J. Wilson, estimates that 7 to 20 Leftists' successful election to parliament was influenced by the Estate Tamil vote in 1947.

[40] See R. V. Sagar, et. al., *The Human Cost of Commercial Forestry: A Study of the Conditions of Coupe Labourers in Kodaikanal Hills: A Supreme Court Commission Report,* (A typescript copy of this document is available at the Library of the Director, Research and Development, Madurai Province, Beschi College, Dindigul 624-004, India).

[41] C. V. Velupillai was a poet and trade union leader whose roots went back to the tea estates. As of the writing of this paper, I do not know whether this "sketch" was ever developed into a full *purāṇam.* As of now, I have not had access to his papers. The form in which it appears here is an edited version of my fieldnotes and not an exact transcription of a tape recording. Those portions which were written verbatim, when reproduced here, have been done so within quotation marks.

[42] This line, *"avalukkuttāmir entra per"*, is from a much renowned South Indian poet and song writer named Bharathithasan's poem, which was made popular in the opening lyrics to a song in a Tamil film.

[43] Bharathithasan wrote a poem by this title in which Siva is called father *(tantai).* From the lyrics alone it would be difficult to say whether this reference is to Siva as the father of *tamil ṭāi* as well as of the Tamil people, or if he is to be seen as the father of the Tamil people and the spouse of *tamil ṭāi.* Of course, in typical mythological fashion, he could be all of these (see Bharathithasan 1985:45).

[44] An allusion to *Kadirgamam* (Sinhala: *Kataragama*) in the South of Sri Lanka where Hindus and Buddhists go as pilgrims and which is believed to be Skanda or Murugan's main abode in the island.

[45] Raymond Williams notes that in English, "labour" gradually lost its association with pain since the 16th century, except in the labor of childbirth. In C. V. Velupillai's *purāṇam,* this association seems to be recovered, albeit in Tamil (see Williams 1983:76-77).

[46] See Kapferer (1988) for such an historical position and my criticism of it (Daniel forthcoming). On the Durkheimianism of such *moral orders* see Evens (1982).

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CASTE AND CONFLICT AND ELITE FORMATION
The Rise of a Karava Elite in Sri Lanka, 1500-1931

Michael Roberts

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