LIVING WITH TORTURERS

AND
OTHER ESSAYS OF INTERVENTION:
SRI LANKAN SOCIETY, CULTURE
AND POLITICS IN PERSPECTIVE

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The cover illustration titled "One Impaled on a Stake" was adopted from
An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon in the East Indies authored
by Robert Knox. The book was originally published in London in 1681
by Richard Chiswell.

Dedication

For my parents Eric Perera and Rohini Obeyesekere and
Anoli, all of whom in different ways taught me the value
of patience and dissent, and when to intervene.

The Contents

Preface

"If the path is clear
And if you can see well
Why stagger in the wilderness
Like someone who has lost the way?"
- **Sinhala proverbial verse**

As one can see the component essays in this collection are relatively brief, and I hope the language is not too tedious. At least it was not supposed to be. Two incidents prompted me to present this collection in this manner. A colleague at the university told me one morning in March 1994, that he enjoyed reading one of my articles which had appeared in a local newspaper. But what was more important was what he added later:

> "I usually do not read long articles. It was by accident that I noticed you were the author. That prompted me to read it through."

The article concerned however, was not particularly long, and yet it was considered too long by one of my own colleagues. This encounter, and subsequent investigations convinced me that articles defined as too long tended in general not to capture the public's attention irrespective of the nature and value of their content.

This lack of enthusiasm to read, particularly something outside one's immediate field of interest is a negative trend that has manifested itself within Sri Lankan society over the last two decades. This has unfortunately led to a wide-spread phenomenon of restricted horizons and parochial vision.

The other incident that prompted me to compile this collection was the observation of another colleague. He observed that in his experience short essays tended to be read more widely than full length books or scholarly articles. Further, he provided me with a couple of convincing examples from Sri Lanka itself. The influence some writers had succeeded in wielding through this form was quite impressive, even though the outcome of such influence was not always constructive or positive in my perception.

At this point I decided that whatever my academic contributions to scholarly journals may be, public interventions on issues I considered important should be based on four primary criteria:

1) They should be written interventions, which people can read and discuss at leisure.

2) They should be relatively short in length, and their language should be readable.

3) They should primarily be written in local languages.

4) Such interventions should ideally appear in widely accessible journals or newspapers.

By experience however, I realized soon that the last objective was relatively difficult to fulfill, particularly when the interventions tended to contradict widely held beliefs or conventions. The most liberal and radical editors in one context turned out to be ruthless censors in another. Thus the genesis of the present project can be located within the concerns and considerations outlined above.

All the essays in this collection deal with some aspect of Sri Lankan culture, politics or society. However, it would be clear that I have focused more on Sinhala society. The reason for that is my better familiarity with the Sinhalas, their politics, their problems, their fears, and their society in general. Some of these essays have already been published. Most, if not all, were motivated by specific incidents that I experienced in recent times. The primary objective I had in mind in writing these essays was to raise some basic issues rather than provide comprehensive answers or solutions. Moreover, this collection was not compiled for scholarly consumption. It was intended for anybody who had a general interest in Sri Lanka. I must confess however that at times these essays also provided me an ideal opportunity to vent my own frustrations in a relatively constructive manner. At this stage I should also point out that many of the issues I have addressed in these essays will be dealt with in more detail in a number of papers which are already under way.

I merely want to address one more issue in this preface. I was criticized not so long ago by a "professional critic" who stated that my language was too simple, and that I tended to address issues that were irrelevant to academics. Well, my position on language has already been stated above. On the other hand what is relevant to academics is a relative matter, and in any case as an anthropologist and an average Sri Lankan, I refuse to be imprisoned within the confines of the ivory tower. Besides, I would find such an existence utterly boring.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues and friends at the University of Colombo and International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo for all the help they have extended towards this project. Regi Siriwardene and Gameela Samarasinghe were particularly helpful in proof-reading this document. I would also like to thank my students who provided me much information, insights and motivation. More importantly however, I would like to thank my critics — particularly the uncritical ones — whose irrational criticism of constructive criticism and dissent provided me much valued and needed motivation. The Ministry of Defense has also been quite helpful, albeit in an unintended manner. The declaration of long curfews consequent to the completion of the parliamentary elections in August 1994 provided me much needed time to complete most of this project.

May these, and all others who have been helpful in a variety of ways attain *nirvana.*

Sasanka Perera

Department of Sociology
University of Colombo
Colombo 3, Sri Lanka

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Societies of Terror: The Absence of a Body and Problems of Mourning and Coping[1]

Introduction:

The January 1994 discovery of mass graves and skeletal remains of unidentified persons in Suriyakande in Southern Sri Lanka received much coverage in the Sri Lankan print media. So did the events that followed, which among other things included the holding of an identification parade for the purpose of "identifying" the skeletal remains and the actual "identification" of some of the skeletons and other items found in the graves.

With these news items the conscience of the middle classes in Colombo and other urban centres received a mild anxiety attack while the misery of those who have actually lost loved ones as a result of terror and political violence in the South came to the surface once again, exposing the realities of a country still in mourning and shock behind the facades of air-conditioned malls, joyous music on FM stations, the chitchats on cellular telephones, and the illusive existence of suburbia. The United National Party (UNP) government (the ruling party at the time), for its part promised a "full scale investigation."

In this short essay, I would like to place the events that followed the discovery at Suriyakande in the context of the social problems of narrating unnatural death as well as the consequences of perceived death in the absence of a body.

Grave Politics:

Since there were no restrictions on speculation, many people expressed their opinions as to whose remains these might be. Initially, the government media tended to suggest that these were the remains of victims of the 1971 JVP[2] insurrection even though the excavators had to cover their noses to keep out the smell resulting from the decomposition of bodies (Sunday Island, 9 January 1994). However, the absurd-

ity of this claim was obvious from the fact that 23 years after the 1971 insurrection any bodies buried at that time would have completely decomposed by now, which clearly was not the case.

Soon afterwards the government came up with another explanation, which suggested that the remains were those of UNP supporters killed by the JVP in the more recent uprising in the late 1980s. On the basis of an alleged recognition of a sarong worn by a UNP supporter who was supposedly killed by the JVP, a government minister categorically stated that the remains were those of UNP supporters (Irida Lankadipa, 16 January 1994). However, even this explanation was merely an irrational statement by a government in panic. For one thing the JVP was never known to have buried their victims. On the other hand the remains were discovered in three mass graves within a restricted area where a government communication facility was located. The facility was guarded by army and police units 24 hours a day. As such, it would have been impossible for the JVP to bury their victims in this particular location even if they had killed them.

Many others, such as the opposition politicians who initiated the excavation supported the view that these were the skeletal remains of the 40 students who disappeared from the Embilipitiya area after being detained by the military at the height of the JVP insurrection and the government's counter-insurgency campaign. Many of the relatives and loved ones of the disappeared students also seemed to agree with this explanation.

However, other than such speculations, two aspects associated with the discovery and its aftermath were very clear at this point. One, these were clearly the bodies of people who were killed in an extra judicial fashion and buried illegally within a restricted area controlled by the government. Remains of legs and hands tied together and blindfolded skulls provided adequate evidence for this conclusion. Second, it was also obvious that subtle and not so subtle political shadow dramas were also taking place in the background. For instance the opposition timed the excavation (and the discovery) to coincide with the advent of the New Year in 1994 for maximum political and psychological impact.

On the other hand, the government and its supporters tended to draw the public's attention away from the events with a series of accusations levelled at the opposition. The government accused the opposition of illegally assuming the power of the judiciary by initiating the excavations (Irida Lankadipa, 16 January 1994). However, soon after the initial discoveries were made, the excavators fetched the Embilipitiya magistrate to the site before proceeding any further. In any case the opposition argued that if they had informed the government of its intentions, it would have taken steps to pre-empt or sabotage the excavation. Interestingly, when the excavators returned to the site on the second day skeletal remains and parts of clothing had been introduced to the site from elsewhere in an apparent attempt to discredit the operation (Ravaya, 16 January 1994). Human skeletal remains were also scattered by unidentified persons in public places in nearby towns in an apparent attempt to re-introduce the fear psychosis that gripped the people in the late 1980s. As part of the same process of grave politics, a government minister also made the following observation:

"As far as we know so far graves were ransacked by wild animals like foxes. Now our bankrupt political parties have also initiated this fox-like (බටද් වැඩ) practice. It is interesting that the opposition which can never gain power through an election is walking around looking for corpses." (Irida Lankadipa, 16 January 1994)

However, seven months after the statement above was made, the opposition became the elected government in the country, and their grave excavation activities continued, not merely in Suriyakande but also in Hokandara, close to Colombo and elsewhere as well.

The Absence of a Body and the Problems of Mourning and Coping:

In a certain sense, the surfacing of the skeletons from these mass graves also marked the surfacing of a certain kind of hope for some of the aggrieved. For them this was not an occasion to celebrate, nor was it an euphoric moment that indicated some possible avenues for justice or any such lofty possibilities in the future. As cases from Argentina, Chile, Brazil and Guatemala have indicated in recent times, the possibility of seeking justice is not always as easy as it may seem. For some people the discovery at Suriyakande was simply a possible first step in their attempts to cope with an intolerable situation.

However, Suriyakande and Hokandara are not isolated cases. The Sri Lankan countryside is scattered with such unmarked mass graves, not to mention sites where torture and violent death took place. Many of these locations are known to local people. Such places are spatially marked as are they clearly identified in the local discourses and narra-

tives of terror. Perhaps local people may decide to point out more such places to politicians, human rights activists, lawyers or journalists in times to come.

Experiences of unnatural and violent death (particularly those involving an absence of a body), and the narratives of such experiences have to be understood in the context of a language of incompleteness, suddenness, darkness, and endless unfulfilled continuity. Das in a recent essay has observed that death is marked by its non-narratability and rupture of language, and that ordinary language becomes transformed in the process of making death narratable. This transformation, according to Das occurs at the level of cultural paradigms for the expression of grief. Nevertheless, she notes that the relationship between these paradigms and the individual expression of grief remains problematic, especially if death resulted in violation of cultural norms governing good death (Das 1990: 345-346). In such cases survivors cannot easily resort to conventional means of mourning and expression of grief.

The remains discovered, or rather rediscovered, at Suriyakande (and later at Hokandara as well) are clearly those of victims of political violence. For those who lost their loved ones, whether they were victims of JVP violence or non-JVP death squads is not the point. The point is that many of them not only lost their loved ones, but also lost a "body," an essential prerequisite to fulfill the obligations of conventional mourning, and coping with death itself in the long run.

The lack of a body clearly poses a serious problem in many cultures of terror in terms of subverting the normal expression of grief. Thus Das talks of a woman who discovered some human bones in a park and was convinced they were her husbands' (who had been murdered by a Hindu mob and his body removed) (Das 1990: 356). Ariel Dorfman's powerful novel *The Widows* also deals with this theme where a group of peasant women claim a body that came floating down the river as that of their disappeared husbands, sons and brothers (Dorfman 1988).

The well known case of the "Women of Calama" in Chile also provides a similar example. The husbands of a group of peasant women in Calama were killed by the Chilean military in October 1973, and their bodies were removed. The women were forced to organize their lives in silence in order to protect themselves and their children. Some attempted to cope by placing photos of the dead men on abandoned graves, and visited them once a year to keep their memories alive. Others simply told their children that their fathers had gone in search of work (Timerman 1988: 27). Both tactics and the general atmosphere of silence not only helped them survive, but also solved the immediate problem of the absence of bodies. A body would allow people to fulfill the obligations of a funeral. It is also a legitimation ritual in terms of defining and organizing the future.

Similarly in the Sri Lankan context also the lack of a body poses serious social problems other than that of grieving and coping. It means that deep emotional wounds are never really allowed to heal. No compensation is paid to the kin of those that had disappeared. Young wives of disappeared men are not legally recognized as widows making it difficult for them to re-marry and reconstruct their lives and frame their futures. In this context the events that followed the discovery at Suriyakande not only makes sense, but was perhaps predictable.

Let us pay some attention to the discovery at Suriyakande itself and what followed. The skeletal remains were dug up by people who were not competent in either forensic anthropology or forensic medicine. At the very least, neither were the diggers amateur archaeologists. The discoveries (skeletal remains and clothes) were simply collected into fertilizer bags[3] and taken to the local Magistrate Courts complex. Soon afterwards an identification parade was organized in an attempt to identify the skeletons. Identification parades are usually held to identify persons, and perhaps corpses, but not skeletons or skulls. Moreover, as in the case of the diggers, those who allegedly identified the remains also had no training in what they were doing.

In one case a woman "recognized" the sarong that belonged to her husband while two other women "recognized" the batik and "Duro[4]" sarongs of their sons, all of whom had disappeared. Two other persons recognized two skulls as those of their disappeared loved ones, on the basis of a false tooth found in one of them and a protruding tooth on the other (Lankadipa, 11 January 1994).

If we allow cold logic, detached rationales (whatever these may be !) or the operation of scientific inquiry, the reality would be that none of these identifications would have been possible. Sarongs are things people buy in stores, and very few of them would have truly individualistic features. Thus many of those who disappeared and those who did not probably owned or continue to own such garments. Such commonly available garments are hardly the ideal means of identifying the remains of a dead person or establishing the fact that a person is in fact dead. The same scenario is applicable to the "identification" of the skulls. Without having expert knowledge, specific training or dental records to corroborate, neither of these two identifications would have been possible.

In fact in a preliminary report submitted in September 1994, the chief judicial medical officer of Colombo states that the remnants initially discovered at Suriyakande (in January 1994) belong to about 21 males in the 18 - 45 age group. He identifies hundreds of separate bone and skull fragments and other material such as shirts and sarongs (Lankadipa, 23 September 1994). However, in a country such as Sri Lanka where there is no established tradition of maintaining medical records no positive identifications could be expected from this kind of situation. Thus the outcome of most, if not all future grave excavations in Sri Lanka is likely to be the same. After all it is unlikely that many mass-murderers would have buried their victims along with any useful identification markers on purpose.

Perhaps we should take a moment to compare this kind of situation with the La Cantuta incident in Peru. Recently some of the remains of ten students kidnapped and murdered by military-sponsored death squads were unearthed in a field. The world is still not aware if forensic examinations have been conducted to identify the remains. However, among the charred bones, remnants of flesh and clothing, were some keys. Two of them fitted the door of the house in which one of the kidnapped students lived, and the other fitted the locker of another kidnapped student. Even though such evidence still would not constitute a clear scientific identification, the keys found in the Peruvian field were far more reliable identification markers than Duro sarongs, shirts and protruding teeth found in Suriyakande.

However, these are extraordinary circumstances where scientific rationality is non-operative, and more importantly not necessary or even unhelpful. Instead, as far as survivors are concerned what governs events such as these are emotional and social compulsions. Thus the usual "reality" is replaced by a powerful belief and the necessity to believe in something that constructs an alternate reality. In this case that something is a symbol that people can identify with their disappeared loved ones — the sarongs, protruding and false teeth, and so on.

Such symbolic indicators would help put an end to that terrible and traumatic experience only the kin of disappeared persons would truly experience. Such symbols would hopefully indicate that their loved ones were actually dead. The necessary rituals and funeral rites can commence, merit can be transferred in the hope that the disappeared — now "confirmed" dead — would be less unfortunate in the other world. Even tombstones may be erected. In other words because now they have come into possession of a body or something that can symbolize a body (the skulls or sarongs) the process of usual mourning that were thus far denied to these people would finally be available to them. In the long run, this is precisely what is necessary for all survivors of political violence and the kin of the disappeared — a viable means of coping. Thus irrespective of criticisms by UNP supporters and some sections of the print media such excavations may have to continue until such places are no longer found or until the survivors deem otherwise.

Suriyakande, I believe is an example of a situation which has provided a few people (merely six families out of over thousand persons who attended the initial identification parade) the long overdue first stage in coping with endless grief and framing their futures. Hokandara may prove to be yet another situation of this kind. Many others clearly still await their chance even though many may never get that chance. For those cynics who may find this kind of argument far-fetched, I would like to offer some lines from Ariel Dorfman's poem *Hope* :

> "My son has been
> missing
> since May 8
> of last year —
>
> But now things have changed.
> We heard from a companero
> who just got out
> that five months later
> they were torturing him
> in Villa Grimaldi,
> at the end of September—
>
> What I'm asking is
> how can it be
> that a father's
> joy
> a mother's
> joy
> is knowing
> that they
> that they are still
> torturing
> their son?
> Which means
> that he was alive

five months later
and our greatest
hope
will be to find out
next year
that they are still torturing him
eight months later

and he may might could
still be alive." (Dorfman 1988: 7 - 8)

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Ellalan Force and the Subversion of the Tamil Conscience?[5]

Just before the festivities of the Sinhala and Tamil New Year got under way in April 1994, a different kind of activity shook Colombo. In place of the usually annoying but much less dangerous fire crackers, four real bombs exploded in the vicinity of four city hotels. No one thought of the JVP since they were supposed to be out of the terror equation. According to government press releases the culprits apparently were the LTTE. The insurgent group has since denied any involvement in the bombings. But most people I have talked to do not seem to believe the LTTE. Figuring out who is actually responsible is the vocation of "intelligence" services and Colombo's well established political pundits, and is certainly beyond the grasp and the oracular abilities of the average anthropologist. What is clear, however, is that something unpleasant and potentially dangerous did happen, and may continue to happen. For what it may be worth, a number of factors seem to be clear in the explosions and some other incidents that took place immediately afterwards:

1) The operation was quite "sloppy" by the usual LTTE standards. The explosions caused relatively little structural damage, even though they did cause some severe damage to some of those attempting to plant the bombs. One of them, who was set on fire as a result of a premature explosion, jumped into the ocean near the Galkissa tourist resort. No one could however locate the infamous cyanide capsules.

2) Soon after the explosions some people received a bilingual (Tamil and English) warning by mail. A group calling itself the Ellalan Force claimed responsibility for the hotel bombings and a similar blast in a bus in Medavachchiya in January 1994. The letters warned people (particularly foreigners) to keep away from tourist hotels and commercial investments because funds generated through such ventures were claimed to be used for killing "innocent Tamils."

3) The English texts of the warning letters seem to be direct translations of the Tamil versions, and were appalling in terms of both spelling and grammar. Mind you, this is not the usual outrage of

the post-independent English-educated middle class individual appalled at the misuse of the Queen's English. After all, one should not necessarily expect the average city terrorist to be fluent in English and talk with an Oxbridge accent. But the grammatically inelegant English does have a point. LTTE's English news bulletins usually read much better, and their spelling is certainly better than mine. For example, just browse through the pages of LTTE's *Hot Spring*. On the other hand the LTTE may have used some of the least intelligent of its Baby Brigade for this operation.

The Subversion of the Tamil Conscience?:

What is much more important than what I have already outlined are two other points that stand out in the warning letters: The name the gang of bombers have given themselves, and the word they use to refer to the Sinhalas. They call themselves the Ellalan Force. Ellalan in Sinhala is Elara, and the Sinhalas are referred to as "Thuttakemunus" or Dutugemunus. It is here that the contradictions of the mythology involved become apparent. The use or abuse of Elara and Dutugemunu images in the discourses and rhetoric of Sinhala nationalism have been amply demonstrated by many social scientists over the past decade or so.

Anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere in a paper some years ago talked about the dismantling of the troubled conscience of Dutugemunu, and by extension the conscience of the Sinhala people. According to myth and popular lore, after his military victory over Elara Dutugemunu was overcome with grief over the killing of thousands of people in war. What Obeyesekere was attempting to illustrate was the subversion of that conscience or the memory of it from the popular conscience of the Sinhalas. In that process another integral component of the whole Elara - Dutugemunu myth cluster has also been dismantled. For instance, the popularly held beliefs regarding Elara's sense of justice and fair play, and the manner in which Dutugemunu himself entombed Elara after his cremation and decreed worship of his tomb. Clearly, if the image of Dutugemunu is used or misused as a symbol of anti-Tamil militancy, the components of the myth outlined above would become problematic, particularly in the context of the on going war fought between Sinhala and Tamil youth.

Whether one accepts Obeyesekere's interpretation or not is besides the point. What is important is to pose the following questions: what has happened to the collective conscience of all Sri Lankans? Why is it that only a very few Sinhalas and Tamils ever question in public the

rationale for the continuing ethnic fratricide? However, the subversion of a group's collective conscience and the emergence of racism is not usually a unilineal process restricted to one group. Such processes generally emerge in response to similar situations in the opposing camp.

Thus, as Obeyesekere has suggested, if an attempt was made to dismantle the Sinhala conscience a few years ago, it would seem that with the bombing of the hotels in Colombo and the misuse of symbols in the warning letters, there seem to be an attempted subversion of the Tamil conscience as well. Alternatively, the folks who set up the explosives are unaware of their own heritage. Elara, a king of South Indian origin, has for long been appropriated as the private property of Sri Lankan Tamils. But in most cases (as far as I know) his image was that of a just king, and sometimes a king who fought off what was perceived as Sinhala aggression. The latter interpretation was of course the work of Tamil nationalists interested in countering Sinhala mythmaking.

But the bomber "boys" seem to have completely transformed the main trends in the Elara myth in the most polemical fashion. Elara is not the ideal symbol for a group of people who go around blowing up hotels, and sometimes themselves, and threatening to kill innocent people simply because the former do not like the politics of the state. After all, Elara or Ellalan is supposed to have offered to repair the damages he had inadvertently caused to a Buddhist temple, executed his own son because he had killed a calf accidently, and regularly offered alms to the Buddhist clergy in Anuradhapura. Surely Elara, indiscriminate bombings and threats to kill civilians and destroy property simply do not go together. I would think the names of other rulers of South Indian origin who have been appropriated by some Sri Lankan Tamil nationalists (and considered Tamil by many Sinhalas themselves) would have served the bombers' purposes much better. For instance what about Kalinga Maga or Arya Chakravarti? Why not Prabhakaran himself?

Killing people and destroying property is bad enough. But doing so in the name of a person who, at least in myth, did not approve of such violence is worse. In a sense this episode is symptomatic of the naive and utterly irrational proportions the current inter-ethnic conflict has reached.

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3

The Monopoly of Patriotism: A Personal Essay on Inclusion and Exclusion[6]

If one has been reading Sinhala and English language newspapers over the past few years it would have become apparent that the idea of "patriotism" has become a major theme. It has also been closely associated with numerous recent debates and polemics. What has happened is that the concept of patriotism has been narrowly defined, and has become a potent weapon in the hands of people who have easy access to sections of the local print media. As a weapon it is primarily used for purposes of vilification and exclusion. In this brief essay I would attempt to understand how and why this situation has come about, how this situation affects me as an individual, and also question some of the premises that underlie this parochial rendition of patriotism.

What is Patriotism ?:

In Sri Lankan politics and what passes sometimes as academic debate, and in popular discourse, a recurring theme is "patriotism." What exactly is patriotism? Samuel Johnson in 1775 claimed that "patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel." The second edition of *Webster's New Universal Dictionary* defines it as follows: "Love and loyal or zealous support of one's own country, especially in all matters involving other countries;" (1983). What are the contours of "patriotism" as expressed in Sinhala society today ? (Hopefully, someone will enlighten us about what is today considered Tamil patriotism.)

Is "patriotism" such a simple and coherent idea that would be universally perceived and accepted by all individuals in a given society, or for that matter in all human societies? Or is it a much more complex concept than what is commonly assumed, which would lead to a variety of uses and abuses? Even the manner in which the concept is perceived in Sinhala society is quite different from Webster's definition, or Johnson's wisecrack. For example, the *Sinhala-English Dictionary* (1981) edited by Maitipe defines the concepts *jatimamatwaya* (කුඩිමමමත්වය) and *jatyalaya* (කුඩාගය) as the love for one's ethnic group

or race[7], and "patriotism" is given as the English translation for both words. The connotations of love for one's country in Webster's definition is absent in Maitipe's formal Sinhala dictionary rendition, and is replaced by the love for one's ethnic or racial group. However, in Malalasekera's *English-Sinhala Dictionary* (1988) patriotism is translated into Sinhala as *swadeshalaya* (ස්වදේශලය), or the love for one's land or country. Here all ethno-racial connotations of the word are completely absent. Whatever formations formal dictionary definitions may take, what ultimately matters is the nature of popular perception. In popular Sinhala perception patriotism combines the notions of loving one's country, ethnic or racial group as well as religion. In terms of this popular perception, largely constructed by the print media, anyone who is deemed not to love her country, ethnic or racial group or religion is considered unpatriotic or *jatidrohi* (කුඩිද්‍රෝහී). However, the problem is that in most cases that idea is presented in antagonistic and polemical ethno-religious terms.

In Sinhala society, as anywhere else, what is perceived as patriotism manifests itself in a number of different ways. Thus I would suggest that within a broad framework of general understanding there ideally would be different variations or meanings of patriotism, depending on people's individual interests, backgrounds, and capabilities. Whatever specific linguistic problems that may arise, we cannot legitimize some meanings at the expense of others. Thus what I consider parochial and exclusionist definitions also have a right to exist. However, I as an individual or others as individuals have no obligations to accept such definitions and mould our lives or outlooks around them. As such, in this article I would use "patriotism" in a manner that would combine a number of meanings. Or simply, patriotism should really be <u>patriotisms</u>.

The Monopoly of Patriotism and the Process of Exclusion:

The existence of such variations in the manifestation of patriotism is not recognized by those self-professed patriots who regularly decide others are not patriotic. These people simply decide what they perceive as patriotism, and assume that others should fit into that model. Those who do not will be castigated as unpatriotic. This is clearly an exercise in inclusion and exclusion. The self professed patriots exclude those who do not fit into their model of patriotism as not merely unpatriotic, but also as conspirators, spies, and irreligious or de-cultured louts. The process of exclusion does not merely end there. In most cases it goes

to the extent of demonizing or stripping off the humanity of the excluded. A simple, but nevertheless a highly unrealistic, polemical and dangerous formula. This is a recurrent phenomenon in Sri Lankan politics as well as in certain debates involving "sensitive" issues such as religion, ethnicity, nationalism, history, and so on.

The most likely scenario under which the persona of the unpatriotic would be constructed and routinely vilified would be somewhat as follows: the self-professed patriots would read or hear about something they dislike or do not understand, and would decide immediately that the ideas expressed were unpatriotic. They would also decide that those who expressed such ("unpatriotic") ideas are worthy of vilification. Such vilification comes naturally since they are already excluded from humanity as well as from the group of people deemed truly patriotic. Many of those who criticize others as unpatriotic would tout themselves as the true patriots. They would further contend that true patriotism is increasingly a scarce resource, and that only they posses this rare commodity. Moreover, many of these highly patriotic folks have access to influential sections of the local print media engaged in parochial nationalist or ultra nationalist discourse. In the columns of such newspapers very little or no space is allocated to the ideas of those who are considered unpatriotic. Clearly the process of exclusion is quite complete.

In many ways this patriotic-unpatriotic dichotomy (us vs. them) was evident in many of the newspapers that provided space for the debate that ensued after "exposing" Stanley Tambiah's book "Buddhism Betrayed?" A consistent theme in many of the articles critical of Tambiah's admittedly problematic book was that everyone who disagreed with the self-professed patriots were not simply unpatriotic, but were enemy agents paid in dollars by "Jewish Foundations" for the singular task of discrediting and wiping out the Sinhala people and Buddhism.

Why Should Someone Else Assess My Patriotism?:

Why should someone else decide on the legitimacy of my patriotism? I would rather do it myself. After all, I have plenty of free education (thanks to Mr. C.W.W. Kannangara's foresight) as well as paid education to figure that out. I am a Sinhala, a Buddhist and a citizen of Sri Lanka. Some of these self-professed patriots who assess my patriotism actually reside in other parts of the world. From these safe havens some of them publish "newspapers" asserting their patriotism towards the country and people they have left behind. Mind you, migration is a human endeavor, and has been so for millions of years. One should not criticize these people for migrating to more prosperous parts of the world, which is clearly a very rational economic decision. Interestingly however, the dubious nature of such remote control patriotism or the exclusionist nature of the more dominant local variety is seldom suspect or questioned.

Instead what is questioned (mostly) is the patriotism of those who elected to stay behind and express relatively independent opinions or those who decided for some obscure reason to return to this country despite the clearly hostile reception of their ideas and opinions. For example, how would the self-professed patriots answer the following question: Why did these people (the excluded ones) come back to the country or elected to stay behind? For patriotic reasons? Absolutely no way. They must be agents of CIA, Mossad or Jewish Foundations (whatever these may be!). Interestingly, they are never accused of being agents of the British MI5, which I suppose is a manifestation of our own colonized frame of mind. Surely, anything from the old colonial masters could not be so bad. Right.

On the other hand none of the self-professed patriots ever bother to ask the others what their views on such issues as nationalism, ethnicity, religion etc are. In a sense, why should they? Who would want to ask such important questions from people whose very humanity has been questioned; whose existence has been demonized? The two types of patriots never engage in debates devoid of inherent hostilities. Most of those who are considered unpatriotic by the self proclaimed patriots on their part do not articulate their views in a language or medium that the average folks would have access to. This discommunication, or the inability to communicate, is part of the problem. So these people's ideas are mostly perceived by the masses not on the basis of their own merit, but on the basis of re-definitions provided by the self-proclaimed patriots. Such problems have made the process of exclusion and inclusion relatively easy to initiate and maintain. Once the process of exclusion is initiated by one group, the other goes on to maintain it. Thus in practical terms the processes of inclusion and exclusion are maintained by both groups.

Patriotism and Dissent:

Dissent, I believe is clearly symbolic of patriotism. It seems to me that all "patriots" have a right to dissent when they are convinced that certain actions or dominant ideologies prevalent in the wider society are unfair or problematic. Patriotism does not mean that individuals in a society have to be clones of a master human person — the "True Patriot." As I mentioned earlier, my Buddhist and Sinhala identities are well entrenched, and I have no intention to hide these. But if I state in a local newspaper or in an international forum (the dollars once again!) that the human rights situation in Sri Lanka is appalling, that is a statement of fact: people have disappeared without a trace, very little has been done by the state to find out what happened to them, others have been murdered, many are poverty stricken while others are talking about some nonsense called NIC status in year 2000. The public expression of what I see as reality cannot strip me of my Sinhalaness or my Buddhistness. On the contrary it reinforces those twin identities and my own kind of patriotism.

A part of my childhood socialization in Buddhist ethics strongly inculcated by some of the most prominent Buddhist schools in the country never suggested (as far as I can remember) that I should accept the dominant ideas prevalent in the society if they had no basis in fact or reality. Such a notion would in fact amount to a clear violation of some of the most profound words of the Buddha himself as contained in the *Kalama Sutta*. Buddhist tradition in general offers the best guidelines for intellectual debate and inquiry offered by any religious tradition. This may be a manifestation of my own Buddhist bias, but that is a bias I can live with, and a bias I shall always defend. Let me quote the question posed by the Kalamas and the Buddha's replies as stated in *Kalama Sutta*:

Question:

"There are some monks and brahmins, venerable sir, who visit Kesaputta. They explain and expound only their doctrines, the doctrines of others they despise, revile and pull to pieces — Venerable sir, there is doubt, there is uncertainty in us concerning them, "which of these reverend monks and brahmins spoke the truth and which falsehood." (Soma Thera 1981: 5)

Answer:

"It is proper for you, Kalamas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kalamas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "the monk is our teacher." Kalamas when you yourself know: These things are bad; these things are blamable; these things are censured by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to harm and ill, abandon them". (Soma Thera 1981: 5-6)

Thus it would seem that questioning what is doubtful is perfectly in tune with Buddhist ethics. Expressing new ideas and discarding what is problematic is also quite compatible with such ethics. What is not compatible is the vilification of persons with whom one does not agree.

Given these circumstances, I would argue that dissent should be considered one of the most important indicators of patriotism. Thus the Buddhist and Christian priests who visited the war-torn northern areas were not being unpatriotic, but simply attempting to turn around a situation that was simply incompatible with what their respective religions teach. Similarly those who critically assess our collective past are attempting to place in perspective new knowledge that would allow us to understand the past better. They cannot be any more unpatriotic than those who criticize them, aggressively attempting to strip them of their patriotism and humanity. If such ideas and actions are perceived to be radically different from the views expressed by the society at large they may be considered manifestations of dissent but not manifestations of lack of patriotism.

Self-Proclaimed Patriots and Real Public Opinion:

Who exactly are the people who decide, for whatever purposes that some of their compatriots are unpatriotic and that they are conspiring to destabilize the country? The conspiracy mentality is not alien to our culture. It manifests itself in politics and socio-economic spheres when these spheres are under stress. Such stresses may be the result of international or national socio-economic conditions. Clearly, economically and socially Sri Lankan society as a whole probably has never been under so much stress in recent times as it is currently experiencing. The corruption in politics, internal contradictions in income distribution, allowing multi-nationals and local business interests unlimited exploitation of human and natural resources, and similar phenomena as a whole directly construct situations leading to heightened stress. Under such conditions everything and everyone can be suspect. Public officials, minorities, religious leaders with a different point of view, scholars, and NGOs can all be viewed with suspicion. It is under conditions such as these that the social construction of the unpatriotic begins.

The point however is to ascertain whether the persona of the unpatriotic person or organization thus constructed is accepted as such by the masses. As far as I can see, such universal acceptance is not quite visible. All we can see is the manner in which these folks are socially constructed as unpatriotic through the print media. So to a large extent what we see are merely the ideas of a predominantly middle class urban based group of people who have relatively easy access to newspapers. Thus in the initial stages the persona of the unpatriotic is constructed not so much socially as by newspapers. Over a period of time such ideas may be accepted by most members of the wider society and thus be socially legitimized. But until then, the middle class perception presented in the newspapers is hardly symbolic of the larger reality.

Therefore when various citizens from the South who visited the war-torn Northern Province were branded as unpatriotic, many others whose voices are not heard but who have nevertheless been closely affected by the violence thought otherwise. Despite the fact that such visits yielded no tangible results, many soldiers and parents of soldiers and police officers who had died in combat stated in interviews that such visits were useful and should continue. A letter written by a police officer in LTTE captivity published in a Sinhala language newspaper expressed a similar idea. Clearly then, for many voiceless people the actions and opinions of those who are branded in sections of the national press as unpatriotic are really not so. For them dissent is really not dissent but common sense.

Finally, I would like to conclude these inconclusive thoughts by stating that Samuel Johnson was quite wrong when he said that patriotism was the last refuge of the scoundrel. At least as far as the Sri Lankan situation is concerned, it would seem that patriotism of the kind touted by sections of the national press is the first and only refuge for a multitude of middle class scoundrels who have forgotten the best of their own heritage. For my part, I treat these people with *karuna* (compassion) and *mettha* (loving kindness) as the Buddha himself had preached. And my patriotism is still intact even though I may be excluded.

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4

Politics of Religious Competition: Evangelization in Contemporary Sri Lanka

Throughout the early 1990s a vociferous debate has ensued regarding certain kinds of religious activities. The most vocal in this regard have been the Buddhists who claim that large numbers of their co-religionists are lured into the folds of Christianity. In this short essay I would attempt to explore the dynamics of religious revivalism and missionary activity, which have added a new and volatile dimension to Sri Lanka's already over-charged socio-political sphere. I would focus my attention mostly on the relationship between the country's majority Buddhists and the mushrooming new evangelical groups.

The Emergence and the Operation of Evangelical Groups:

Christian evangelical groups numbering over 50 have made Sri Lanka one of their bases of operation in the competitive vocation of soul-saving over the last 15 years. Their activities however have become more visible and aggressive only over the past five years or so. Given the fact that they constitute the largest religious block in the country the Buddhists are the most vocal in complaining that some of their co-religionists are being corrupted and converted by Christians. As a result of Sri Lanka's historical legacy and the competitive relations between Buddhists and mainstream Christian groups in the colonial past, Buddhists have seldom had any reason to differentiate between various kinds of Christians. Under the present circumstances however, it is no longer possible to group all Christians together. Buddhist complaints generally tend to overlook similar complaints made by other religious groups. Hindu Tamils from the war-torn Eastern Province complain of the same thing, while the well established Catholic Church of Sri Lanka has also complained of "fundamentalist groups" luring their flock away.

Thus since recent times the word "fundamentalist" has entered the local discourse of religious rhetoric to describe these new groups such as Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witness, Jesus Lives Ministry, Calvary Church, and so on. The conversions are considered "unethical conversions" by the critics. Many of them believe that new converts are won over by offering them financial and other economic incentives. While such incentives certainly play a role they are not the only reasons for the attraction of the new groups. If that was the case it would be difficult to sustain their appeal in the long run. While the conflict between established religions and the new evangelical movements is real and problematic, its real dynamics are not yet properly understood by Sri Lankans.

The interest of evangelical groups in Sri Lanka has to be understood both in the context of situations peculiar to Sri Lanka as well as in the context of regional trends. Evangelical groups have experienced phenomenal successes in many Asian countries such as South Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia etc. In the case of South Korea within a period of 40 years demographic patterns have been completely altered. The once dominant Buddhists have been transformed into minority status. This is one of the indicators that truly worry Sri Lankan Buddhists. On the other hand such indicators motivate evangelical groups operating in places such as Sri Lanka even further. Interestingly, compared to neighboring India and Pakistan, Sri Lankans, particularly Buddhists have been relatively tolerant of the activities of evangelical groups until their successes became too obvious or, more accurately, too visible. Despite the widespread public suspicion of these groups, their activities are not even now restricted by administrative action, such as by restricting access to funds or monitoring their activities by state agencies. Appeals to declare "unethical conversions" illegal have not been entertained by the state.

One of the underlying patterns of operation of the collective evangelical movement in Sri Lanka has been expansion or increase in numbers of both adherents and institutions. Collectively this leads to greater visibility and increased conflict. Visible success have also made some of these groups behave in a rather aggressive and obnoxious manner, showing scant regard to the cultural sensitivities or historical realities of the country. Let me offer one example. Mihintale is a sacred Buddhist city in the North Central Province. Buddhists believe that the first Buddhist missionaries preached the message of the Buddha to the local king in the vicinity of the city in ca. 250 BC. Hence its religious and historical importance. At a government sponsored exhibition in the city to mark the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka a group calling itself the "Evangelical Library" had planned to distribute bibles and bible tracts to those who came to the exhibition. Earlier, in 1993, the

Evangelical Library wrote to Christian leaders in the country complaining that they were not adequately helping them to "reach the 4000 Buddhist monks in the vicinity" who were ripe for conversion. The appeals by the established church leaders to abandon the project was not heeded, and the planned activity ultimately did not materialize only because the exhibition was cancelled.

In the language of commonsense this type of activity simply means asking for trouble. Such activity elsewhere in the country is unlikely to make much waves. But such aggressive and insensitive behaviour in a Buddhist sacred city amounts to a violation of sacred space. In the context of Sri Lankan history it would be clear that such violations of sacred space have always lead to violence. For instance in 1904 the Catholic Church built in the midst of the Buddhist sacred city of Anuradhapura (a few kilometers away from Mihintale) was burnt down. The church was rebuilt later outside the limits of the sacred city. Over the years the established Christian groups have worked out a mechanism for co-existing with Buddhists and other groups such as the Hindus without inciting unnecessary conflict or violence. For instance, while all established Christian groups would admit into their folds those who want to convert to Christianity, they do not generally engage in aggressive missionary activities, except for a few overzealous individuals. This understanding has been relatively successful. Most evangelical groups however, have paid no attention to such useful lessons learnt from hard and bitter history.

Since much of the funds for the new evangelical movements come from Europe and the U.S.A (and to a certain extent from South Korea) the activities of these groups are commonly seen as a Western conspiracy to undermine Sri Lankan political order and Sinhala Buddhist culture. Such concerns are articulated as part of the regular rhetoric of Buddhist activists, and many Catholics I have talked to have explained these activities specifically as an American conspiracy. Of course conspiracy theories are endemic in societies which experience chronic socio-political instability, which unfortunately is the case in Sri Lanka. Many Buddhists and members of the Christian establishment have stated that the apparently unlimited availability of funds to the new evangelists is their main concern. This is particularly the case with Buddhists who complain that they do not have any international networks to collect much needed funds to counter these activities.

Reasons for Success: Some Myths and Realities:

Unlimited funds and aggressiveness alone cannot explain the successes of the new evangelists in Sri Lanka. We have to look for other socio-political indicators to understand some of the more important and less apparent reasons. First, there are no statistics to indicate the exact number of new evangelical groups and their followers. Their success or perceived success is gauged on the basis of their relentless activity and visibility. Thus, while I would not completely underestimate their relative success, I would be skeptical of the overall impact. Visibility, I would argue is much more important than the reality. Given the availability of large funds, one of the primary activities of these groups is to construct new places of worship and associated buildings which give the impression that these groups are expanding at a phenomenal rate. On the other hand, much of the reality surrounding the operation of these groups is lost in both the secrecy of the groups themselves and the rhetoric and phobia of the challengers.

Secondly, established religions in Sri Lanka are themselves clearly in crisis. Many of those who have joined new evangelical groups (both former Buddhists and Catholics) complain that the main reason for them to abandon either Buddhism or Catholicism was the lack of interest the Catholic and Buddhist establishments had shown towards their problems. For instance, many of the Catholics who joined the Jesus Lives Ministry did so because they felt completely alienated from the church, which according to them had grown too big, and as such too distant from them. They felt that the interests of the church were no longer compatible with their interests. They found solace and a sense of belonging within the smaller congregations of Jesus Lives Ministry, and their vibrant church services and the use of music were much more appealing than the relatively archaic services of the Catholic church.

Buddhist converts also presented similar reasons. Many of the Buddhists who are attracted to these groups come from socially or emotionally depressed backgrounds. For persons from such backgrounds the benefits or emotional help from Buddhist institutions have been inadequate or non-existent. For instance, mainstream Christian churches have numerous counselling programmes to counsel people with marital, drug and trauma related problems. On the other hand, many of the new evangelical groups are organized like extended counseling or self-help groups. No such system exists in the Buddhist establishment despite the vast network of temples and monks. Though Buddhist temples in many Sinhala villages were closely linked to the village through vari-

ous religious and ritual activities, their monks were traditionally expected to be somewhat aloof from the matters of the world and concentrate on such things as Nirvana, or the Buddhist notion of ultimate bliss. However, in a society replete with socio-economic problems, the temples and the traditional notions that governed their functioning need to change in accordance with the needs of the society. By and large no such positive changes have taken place. While weekend classes to teach the Buddhist doctrine to children is now an established part of many temple activities, much more needed services such as counselling for victims of political violence, economic help for villages and so on were not forthcoming, except in a few rare exceptions.

By contrast many of the established Christian churches as well as the new evangelical groups were active at village level in helping some of the victims of political violence cope with their grief. Some of the people who benefited in this manner turned to these religions in gratitude and in faith. Others did not. In many instances however, there seem to be an unwritten understanding which suggests that continued support or better support would be offered only to those people who joined the new movements. This was particularly the case when it came to offering economic incentives such as money to buy land, fertilizer, seeds, free education for children and food etc. It is this part of the evangelical equation that is classified as "unethical conversions," and brought to the realm of public debate by both Buddhist and Christian activists hostile to the new evangelical groups.

But such tactics alone cannot explain why Sinhala Buddhists in interior villages around the country get attracted to these groups. For one thing, the decision to join such seemingly alien religious organizations with their peculiar ritual practices would not be easy. In the relatively cohesive village environment such a move would invariably lead to a certain amount of ostracization. Such ostracization could lead to complete economic downfall as far as certain groups are concerned. For example, a group of Rodi people (who occupy a space similar to India's Dalits or the so called untouchables in relation to the Sinhala caste system) in the North Western Province were approached by an evangelical group and were initially willing to convert. However, the whole exercise was eventually halted by the Rodi leaders when higher caste villagers in the surrounding areas threatened to boycott their produce. In practical terms religious salvation under such circumstances would lead to no salvation at all. Therefore to make such decisions people will necessarily have to be economically independent. This is

when the resources of the new groups come into play. Alternatively the deprivations certain categories of people experience are so extreme that they would tend to cling to any new ray of hope however illusive it may be.

Other Rodi in the same area have however opted to convert, and a small church building has already been constructed in their village. The church help them in their cultivation and trading activities, and offer them financial incentives. The regular visits by the new religious leaders tend to reinforce the notion that the centuries old alienation is finally giving way. Under most circumstances Buddhist monks will not visit a Rodi village. In a similar case in the Kurunegala district a number of low caste Sinhala Buddhists demanded that a group of higher caste monks in a nearby temple should accept alms from them. The demand was routinely refused. Such behavior on the part of the monks is a complete violation of central Buddhist teachings. Within a week these people had joined a Catholic church in the vicinity. Though in this case the conversion was to mainstream Catholicism, most people in similar situations join the new evangelical groups. More than anyone else they operate at a grass root level, and seem to have identified the basic problems people have. It is through offering solutions to such problems that these groups extend their influence, and increase their flock. Thus it is not surprising that most Buddhist converts to the new groups are from low caste groups or from socio-economically deprived village areas.

Conclusion:

The ultimate point is however that this phase of new evangelization should not be allowed to add a new antagonistic dimension to Sri Lanka's already polarized inter-ethnic and religious relations. If members of established religions are concerned about what is happening they should attempt to understand the real reasons for it. No social movement can operate in a vacuum. Thus the social space within which the new evangelists operate and thrive has to be understood in its proper context. If the established religions and their affiliated institutions can address the problems of the masses, there ought not be any space for these new groups to operate. To do so both Buddhist and Christian activists have to go where the problems are. They cannot expect people to come to them. Nor can they wish that the new evangelists would just go away.

5

Tambiah, Cultural Components Beyond Criticism and the Construction of Mass Hysteria

The Origin and the Polemics of the Controversy:

Consequent to the publication of an article in the *Island* of 27th October 1993 a controversy erupted regarding S. J. Tambiah's book *Buddhism Betrayed?: Religion, Politics and Violence in Sri Lanka.* Except a few, most articles critical of the book have been based on that original article, and the interpretations it offered.

The Derana of 14 November 1993 in a front page article presented the sensational "news" that with the publication of Tambiah's book an international conspiracy against Rev. Maduluwawe Sobita and the Sangha in general had been launched. According to many of the "reports," the co-conspirators included other than Tambiah himself, the World Institute for Development Economic Research (WIDER), its former director, and the United Nations Organization. The chief beneficiary was claimed to be the Tamil guerrilla group, the LTTE.

On the other hand the book had been published nearly one and a half years earlier, and what the conspirators had achieved between then and the moment the story was "exposed" in the *Island* was not quite clear. Besides, the serious allegations that many of the newspapers critical of the book had levelled against the author and the director of WIDER were never substantiated, an act that could easily have led to litigation in some parts of the world. The ultimate authority seems to be a publication of dubious reputation called *Sri Lanka Express* published in the United States. In fact the original *Island* article was a reproduction of a *Sri Lanka Express* article. Piyasena Dissanayake also cites this as his source (Irida Divayina, 5 December 1993).

Interestingly some of the contradictions and polemics of the controversy clearly come to light here. For example, Mangala Illangasinghe had castigated in his article in the *Irida Divayina* of 5th December 1993 unnamed Sinhala academics who are not critical of the

LTTE's use of violence and Tamil racism. The reason according to him was that these academics had been lured by dollars to write falsehoods. What is interesting, however, is that the questionable publications of those patriotic folks in Los Angeles and other places are upheld without question by the critics of the book. It would seem that the publishers of the *Sri Lanka Express* and other such publications must have emigrated to the United States for the shear love of the motherland, totally undazzled by dollars.

According to Professor Illangasinghe, as stated in the *Irida Divayina* of 5th December 1993, and some others I have talked to, most of the funding for these nefarious anti-national activities (such as Tambiah's book and the dollars for unpatriotic academics) come from "Jewish organizations." What interest the Jews, the Israelis or Zionists have in disrupting Sinhala society is beyond my comprehension. Perhaps they need to use this country as a new Jewish settlement since the occupied territories are becoming too crowded with all those Russian immigrants. The contradictions and polemics of this controversy or debate are too many to discuss here. Besides, my main intention here is simply to locate this uproar within the larger context in which it has occurred.

The Social Context of the Controversy:

We are living in times in which the Sinhalas and Buddhists feel particularly threatened. These misgivings are usually articulated within the context of the on-going war in the North-East and in the context of the allegations of the so called "unethical conversions" by Christian groups. Sinhalas and Buddhists are generally perceived to be victims of both processes. The Tamil "victims" of both activities usually do not constitute any part of the Sinhala consciousness (Perhaps we should note that Tamils also die in the on-going war, and many Hindus also complain of "unethical conversions," particularly in the Eastern Province). Some doomsday oracles suggest that at the rate of what is going on now the Sinhala Buddhists would be a minority by the next century. The reality of that claim is not the issue. The issue is that if people believe a certain social situation to be real, in their minds it will be real. Everything that occurs within that imagined reality would seem to fit into that context as well. Whatever action undertaken perceivably to remedy the situation will also be influenced by these thoughts. Thus under the present circumstances Tambiah and his book are highly suspect.

His background as a scholar of Buddhism had no place in much of the the controversy or debate that ensued. As a matter of fact, many of those who were highly critical of the book did not seem to have read Tambiah's previous scholarly work on Buddhism or even heard of the man prior to the controversy. In his article in the *Divayina* of 5th December 1993, Illangasinghe specifically states that Tambiah has no knowledge of Buddhism. Ironically or sadly, many of the critics had not even read the book they were criticizing. What really mattered was his ethnicity (Tamil), his religion (allegedly Christian) and the fact that he was an American citizen living in USA (the dollars of course!). These factors were clearly articulated as issues for concern at a press conference held at Naga Vihara in Kotte (Irida *Divayina*, 18 November 1993).

At one level what this amounts to is the idea that no one other than Sinhala Buddhists can write about Buddhism. The more serious and disturbing aspect of the situation is the manifestation of a polemical trend that has been detected in Sinhala society for some time now. That is the lack of differentiation between Tamil people in general and LTTE activists. Thus Tambiah who is a Tamil who wrote a book somewhat critical of Buddhism had to be a Tiger. What a profound revelation!

However, this kind of thinking goes far beyond ethnicity. It is a manifestation of an intolerance towards criticism of certain aspects considered beyond criticism by many Sinhalas. These would include the Sinhala nation, Buddhism and action perceivably undertaken on behalf of them. These taboo areas seem to have achieved a kind of holy status, and to be critical of them would be analogous to blasphemous behaviour. As a matter of fact even a Sinhala who violates these holy spheres would not be spared. They would naturally be traitors, as sug-. gested in many published articles. In fact the title of Disanayake's article dated 5th December 1993 in the *Divayina* was "Sinhalas who support Eelam."

Perhaps I should point out that there is a vast difference between supporting academic freedom, having friends who happen to be Tamils and being a Sinhala supportive of Eelam. For one, I am not supportive of Eelam, especially one constructed under the rule and philosophy of the LTTE. But I have no problems with a meaningful and serious devolution of power. After all, the idea of devolution is not completely an alien concept to Sri Lankans. It was through a certain kind of devolution that many of our ancient kings ruled this land. They had very little direct control beyond the capital. The local and regional power and authority over the lives of people and the resources of the area were vested in regional rulers appointed or recognized by the king. The kind of centralized authority that we have become accustomed to in recent times is merely a colonial legacy that we have attempted to project into the distant past.

Coming back to the subject, it is ironic that the very criticism of Tambiah exhibited some specifically un-Buddhistic tendencies. For example, in the *Silumina* of 21 November 1993, Dissanayake had observed without offering any proof that Tambiah was an Eelamist office holder in Toronto. Why he had to go all the way to distant Toronto to take up a position as an Eelamist office holder while the extremely articulate Boston based Eelam lobby was much closer to Harvard University where Tambiah teaches remains a mystery. My childhood training in Buddhist ethics strongly inculcated by two of the most prominent Buddhist schools in Colombo seem to suggest that this is a clear violation of Buddhist norms prohibiting lying and uttering meaningless words. It is also a pity that we have forgotten the words of the Buddha as contained in the Kalama Sutta which offers some useful guidelines for intellectual debate and inquiry as well as dissent (see essay # 3).

Unfortunately, the criticisms of Tambiah's work did not occur within this tradition, the tradition that we have inherited from the very religion whose image these critics were clamouring to "protect." The Buddha or the Buddhist tradition has not endorsed vicious lying, character assassinations and the like. None of the criticisms were neither impartial nor constructive. They verged more on the bizarre and fantastic. Professor Mendis Rohanadeera, addressing a mostly undergraduate audience at the University of Colombo soon after the controversy emerged in the print media, stated that Tambiah could not write a book of this nature because "he had not lived in this history." He was specifically referring to Tambiah's early chapters dealing with the Buddhist revival in the early part of this century. The extension of this logic is that since not many people alive today would have lived in that period, we cannot write about that history. Or else we will have to bank on the memories of senile senior citizens. Perhaps it is even better if we stop teaching history altogether since it would be difficult to locate people who were contemporaries of King Dutugemunu, Devanampiyatissa or even Sri Wickrama Rajasinha. But then, we can always bank on the memories of reincarnated individuals and spirit mediums since they seem to be everywhere.

The same speaker offered a new definition of anthropology stating once again why Tambiah, an anthropologist should not have written this book. Anthropology, according to Professor Rohanadeera is the study of contemporary people and should not dabble in history. If this is the case we would have to ban most of the anthropological texts written to date. The presents do not exists in isolation to the pasts. Presents and pasts are interrelated, defined and perceived differently by different individuals, and groups. Moreover, anthropologists clearly have a legitimate right to write about these pasts as well as the presents.

The Content of the Book:

The editorial of the *Irida Divayina* of 5th December 1993 makes a major issue of the fact that the 52 people who signed a document stating their commitment to academic freedom have not bothered to comment on the contents of Tambiah's book. As one of the signatories to that document I should perhaps explain our position before looking into some of the problems concerning the content of the book. Our position simply was that anyone can agree or disagree with the content of the book, but that we would not comment on it (the content of the book:) — at that particular moment in time. The reason was simply that in a small document of this nature which had a specific purpose, we did not intend to discuss something that would have taken much space. That did not mean that all of us agreed on the content or the nature of the book.

Perhaps I should make one other point before assessing the content of the book. Tambiah or anyone else certainly has the right to write what they want within certain clearly demarcated academic limits. It may be suggested, as it was on this particular occasion, that anthropologists cannot write material that would hurt the sensitivities of various groups. Strictly theoretically, this is the ethically and politically correct position to take. However, this is one of those ethical positions in anthropology that has always run into problems and always will. Anything an anthropologist writes may hurt the sensitivities of some group or another. For instance, we will not be able to write about those who engaged in political violence because it may hurt their feelings. We cannot undertake research into rape and murder since that too may hurt the sensitivities of the rapists and murderers. On such a basis there would be very little anthropologists can actually write about. Thus in addition to protecting the privacy of individuals concerned, in practical terms there may be very little anthropologists can do with regard to the above issue. After all "sensitivities" and "hurt" are relative terms, which change from place to place, from person to person and over time.

My comments on the content of the book, which would follow are only my views, and may not reflect the views of those colleagues who signed the document I referred to above. We can criticize writers only on the basis of the academic merit of what they write. As we have seen in this discussion, this is not quite what happened. On the other hand, as some critics had stated in the *Sunday Observer* of 5th December 1993, some academics have double standards when they decide which publications are suitable or unsuitable for circulation. I am personally not sure what this refers to. But in such situations we should look for the reasons behind these decisions, and not so much the decisions themselves. If double standards are detected, then we should clearly expose such double standards.

Most anthropologists who know something about Sri Lankan politics, society and religion would have a number of problems with Tambiah's book. I certainly have. It is completely devoid of serious field research, and the careful sifting through of data that should be part of a project of this nature seems not to have happened. Anthropologists can certainly write without field work. But much of the weaknesses of this book could have been overcome if serious and extensive field research was undertaken.

On the other hand many major assumptions of the book amount to large statements, argued without much scholarly vigour or supporting evidence. For instance, the chapter dealing with monks' participation in violence pose serious questions in terms of reliability. For example, consider the following observation:

> "With some notable exceptions, the majority of monks explicitly or privately supported and condoned the Sinhalese army's killing of Tamil guerrillas and had not felt the moral imperative to object to the tribulations imposed on Tamil civilians" (Tambiah 1992: 95).

Who are these notable exceptions Tambiah talks of? I personally know of no well known monks who spoke against the killings of Tamil guerrillas by the military or expressed publicly concern for Tamil civilians in the war zones. But there were some who braved severe criticism in the Sinhala society and visited Jaffna to "seek a solution." We know that those trips did not usher in any tangible results. But instead those monks were castigated as traitors or Tiger sympathizers. Perhaps these are the exceptions Tambiah have in mind.

On the other hand, have the majority of monks advocated or justified violence against guerrillas or civilians? Some surely have, as most of us know from press reports, and in terms of our own field research. But do these constitute the majority? Personally, I am not at all sure. I am also not sure how Tambiah came to such conclusions. We usually hear what a group of articulate and mostly urban based monks, some of whom have justified violence have to say about these issues. Not only monks, lay activists have also engaged in such activity. But what do we know about the views of the monks resident in the villages, small towns and generally those who have less or no access to the media. Have they also condoned such violence? Perhaps some may have. On the other hand I have interviewed many such monks who are troubled by the escalating levels of violence in the country involving the Sinhalas and Tamils, but do not want to talk against it because they feel that the general mood in the Sinhala society is not conducive to receiving such criticism. Such insights can only be gained from field research, particularly through extensive interviews.

Then Tambiah refers to monks who directly participated in violence:

"— they passively condoned, perhaps even collaborated in the assassination of recalcitrant senior monks by JVP/DJV executioners"

Some additional details would have been more helpful in getting the point through. Who were these killer monks? In which temples did they organize assassinations? Which senior monks were assassinated by these junior killer monks? How many were involved altogether? Then Tambiah observes again:

"— I find it necessary to pose the question of how the "sons of Buddha" — ideally dedicated to nonviolence and required by disciplinary rules to abstain from killing and to be nowhere near marching armies and the traffic of arms — have taken on the more compelling identity of "sons of the soil," which entails militant and violent politics." (Tambiah 1992: 95-96)

Reading the passage above one would assume that the Sangha had defected to the military or violent political groupings in massive numbers. Besides, there is a big difference between ideal Buddhist norms and actual practice. In fact if the ideal religious norms of Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians were carefully adhered to, we would not have most of the problems on the basis of which we are currently killing each other, and writing books and making a living. Besides, generally speaking Buddhism's involvement in violence is hardly a new

or surprising phenomenon. All Buddhist societies — both Theravadin and Mahayana ones — have bloody and violent histories. So have many Hindu, Islamic and Christian societies we can think of. Thus the Sri Lankan case is hardly an exception. It also means that we have to go far beyond religion to find the reasons for such phenomena. If a group of people are threatened in reality or in belief, they would resort to what they consider appropriate action, including selective violence. It is unlikely that the existence of religion that emphasizes non-violence would have much effect under such circumstances. The questions that ought to be posed should be:

1) How do Buddhists cope with and explain violence?

2) How do some of them justify selected political violence that ideally has no place within their religion?

Tambiah does not offer any information on these issues, which I believe should be central to his discussion. For example, he does not pay attention to how and why certain Buddhist activists — lay and otherwise — try to legitimize selected political violence, which Uyangoda had briefly referred to in his article in the *Irida Divayina* of 21st November 1993. There is much concrete evidence to document this trend. However, at the moment this is merely that, a trend and not an encompassing new ethic within Sinhala Buddhism. This also could have been detected and commented upon if data — especially Sinhala newspaper reports — were more carefully analyzed by utilizing extensive field research.

On the other hand much of the other information in the book, which deals with the Buddhist revival of the late 19th and early 20th century, have been documented and commented on by other scholars before — in much more detail. Most of that does not pose problems to academics who are familiar with that period. In that sense the book does not offer me — a Sinhala, a Buddhist, and a person interested in Sri Lankan society and culture — anything new. In fact the author himself states that his book is not generally meant for Sri Lanka specialists but for general readers (Tambiah 1992: 3).

The cover of the book I believe was a serious tactical mistake, and Tambiah has recently apologized to Rev. Sobita for placing his photograph in a "seemingly" polemical position on the cover. If not for that photograph this controversy perhaps may not have taken place at all. On the other hand that particular oratorical position is not something unusual in the context of post-late 19th century Buddhist public debates

which evolved as a result of aggressive missionary activity. However, many of the critics seem to be upset over the picture because they seem to believe — without any real reason — that the position of the monk in the picture is somehow not acceptable. They also seem to forget that the availability of this particular photograph stems from the fact that the monk was in that position at a certain point in time. Ultimately however, Tambiah has to take the responsibility for that picture being on the cover of his book.

It would also be interesting to pose the question if his book had been on religion in the United States, whether a similar picture of an American clergyman would have been placed on its cover by the Chicago University Press. Given the general atmosphere of political correctness prevailing in American society, such an eventuality would have been unlikely. But within the framework of omnipresent, and to some extent unconscious, neo-colonialist thinking such sensitivities do not extend to the Third World, and certainly not to any of its religions.

We have to however, accept that given Tambiah's considerable contribution to Buddhist studies he is more than capable of commenting on Buddhism. It is precisely due to that, that the weaknesses of the book as well as the vicious attacks against him are rather unfortunate.

The Construction of Mass Hysteria: Why?:

This episode is probably the correct time to pose the question why a certain category of scholars get similarly attacked from time to time. Tambiah was merely the latest victim. Gananath Obeyesekere, Kumari Jayawardena and others have been in similar situations before. For instance a whole group of scholars were attacked in the *Divayina* debates of 1984 and 1985 after the critical essays of some social scientists appeared in Sinhala in 1984. I believe that the circumstances and the nature of these incidents are essentially similar, and would shed some light on some of the most serious problems of the Sri Lankan or Sri Lanka-oriented academic discourse dealing with "sensitive" issues such as ethnicity, religion, and nationalism.

The controversy regarding Tambiah's book emerged nearly one and a half years after the book was published, but immediately after a "review" (for the lack of better word that can be used in "civilized" discourse) was published in Sinhala. Similarly the 1984 controversy ensued soon after a selection of essays dealing with Sinhala identity and Buddhism was published in Sinhala in 1984 as a book. The original

papers nevertheless had been presented way back in 1979 — five years before the controversy erupted. They had also been fairly widely debated within intellectual circles writing in English.

This then is the problem: Much of the new, useful, and critical research conducted in Sri Lanka on Sri Lanka seldom get exposed to Sri Lankans mostly or only conversant in Sinhala (or for that matter Tamil). I do not have a problem with people who write in English. To some extent I fall into that category as well. However, as a result of this restriction in access there is very little opportunity for this kind of new interpretation to seep into the local society or be debated in an academically more conducive atmosphere. Instead what happens is that they suddenly descend on the local populace (sometimes camouflaged in dubious interpretations) who are totally unused to and unprepared for such material. This naturally leads to highly polemical, heated and often uncritical debates, or vicious attacks. Such an atmosphere would lead to complete underestimation of the academic merit of such work.

In some of the criticisms of Tambiah's book dealing with the evolution of the Sinhala identity, it was quite evident that the critics had completely missed the debates on the generation of group identities in Sri Lanka that have been continuing over the past decade or so (see *Irida Divayina* of 28th November 1993). Moreover, research dealing with Tamil society is also not generally available to the Sinhalas. Illangasinghe in his article (Irida Divayina, 5 December 1993) poses the question why nobody has researched the problems of the caste system in Hindu society (in Sri Lanka). Well, many have. There are also a few studies focussing on the nature of violence and the process of political myth-making in Tamil society (Eg., the work of Valentine Daniel and Radhika Coomaraswamy). But such material is available only in English. I would suggest that both the 1984-85 and the Tambiah controversy essentially have to be located in this space marked by restricted access to critical or scholarly material on Sri Lankan culture, society and politics.

Sri Lankan academics need to overcome this problem. In a way this reflects a failure in the Sri Lankan education system in which English education has been disrupted. This is not a matter of forcing people to write in the local languages. Many simply cannot. But pertinent literature should be made available to local readers in their languages, at least in summarized form or as reviews simultaneously when the originals are published. I would invite the Sri Lankan social science community to launch such a programme in collaboration with

local universities and interested NGOs, both of which it is quite fashionable to vilify at the moment. This may be one of the few options available to us to construct a more analytical, tolerant and less parochially inclined reading public in this country. This would also lead us to come to grips with serious theoretical debates that have raged in other parts of the world for the past decade or so, while being unnoticed by most Sri Lankans.

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6

The Hegemony of Language Imperialism and the Colonization of the Mind

In the introduction to his new book *Culture and Imperialism* Said makes the following observation:

> "— The great cultural archive, I argue, is where the intellectual and aesthetic investments in overseas dominion are made. If you were British or French in the 1860s you saw, and you felt, India and North Africa with a combination of familiarity and distance, but never with a sense of their separate sovereignty. In your narratives, histories, travel tales, and explorations your consciousness was represented as the principal authority, an active point of energy that made sense not just of colonizing activities but of exotic geographies and peoples. Above all, your sense of power scarcely imagined that those "natives" who appeared either subservient or sullenly uncooperative were ever going to be capable of finally making you give up India or Algeria — (Said 1994)"[8]

I would like to use Said's comments, particularly the ones which I have emphasized as the basic frame of reference within which this brief essay would be located. In this essay I hope to focus on the hegemony of language imperialism in Sri Lanka. By language imperialism I mean the power relationships and the processes of inclusion and exclusion that occur between people who have access to English, the language of Sri Lanka's former colonial masters and those who do not have access to this language. An important component of the cultural archive Said refers to above is the language and literature of the colonizers. These are powerful methods in the process of colonialism. If military processes were utilized for the purpose of actual physical colonization of the land, it was the language and literature of the colonizers that was used to colonize the minds of the colonized.

The other point I want to make at this stage is in reference to Said's observation that the imperialists in the heyday of their colonial enterprise could not imagine that the "subservient and sullenly uncooperative

natives" would ever make them leave the colonies. It would seem that the colonial imagination of that time was not too distant from the contemporary realities in many of the former colonies. I do not merely refer to the process of neo-colonialism, but to the frame of mind the colonial masters managed to construct, which appears to be much more long-lasting and dynamic than neo-colonialism per se. This is particularly visible in Sri Lanka when one looks into the dynamics of current language imperialism. The British may have left. But the manner in which they used their language then, and the frame of mind they had inculcated, are clearly still intact, albeit some minor modifications.

Language, Civilization and Colonialism:

"The white folks told them:
God save the King;
We have come to civilize you
And to teach you how to read and write —

— With the lapse of seven decades
She could write no more.
But she could still
Recite the scriptures in Pali
And read the newspaper in Sinhala.
She even knew enough Tamil,
To argue with the merchants.

Can you read English
Asked the white man
In a sweat-drenched coat.
Lost, the old woman
Simply smiled.

I thought as much
The white man groaned
And told the census-taker:
Another illiterate native." (Perera 1991)

It was primarily through language and literature that the imperialists set about colonizing the minds of the colonized. Of course this process was more successful and complete among the urban based elite who inherited the means to power once the colonial rulers decided that it was too expensive to govern the colonies directly. This "transfer" of power is what is commonly and euphemistically referred to as "independence" in post colonial states.

Fanon referred to the new rulers of these "independent" states as the "nationalist bourgeoisie," while in Sri Lanka novelist Martin Wickramasinghe referred to them as the "bamunu kulaya" (බමුණු කුලය). These were the most complete results of the imperial cultural experiment in which the primary objective was the construction of a "native" elite who thought, dressed and behaved like their masters, but were not quite the same only due to their complexion and slightly different physical features. At the same time they were culturally and socially as alien from their "own" people as were the colonial rulers. They perceived themselves as the chosen few, and the truly human and cultured few among a mass of uncultured natives. Why? Because only they had read Shakespeare, Chaucer, Defoe and could converse in faultless Queen's or King's English.

The colonizers rarely saw their enterprise as an exploitative one. Many of them thought and truly believed that they were doing these natives a great favour. They were being civilized, Christianized, and in general humanized. Even those like Joseph Conrad who saw the reality of colonialism nevertheless believed in colonialism as a civilizing process that was worth the effort, as is apparent from the following lines in "Heart of Darkness":

"The Conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. An idea at the back of it; not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea — something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to —"

Frenchman Jules Harmand (1910) was much more explicit than Conrad in expressing similar ideas:

"It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization, still recognizing that, while superiority confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in return. The basic legitimation of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity." (quoted in Said 1994: 17)

This idea was the dominant logic articulated in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), which generations of natives in British colonies have been subjected to read. Even those of us born well after Sri Lanka had achieved her "independence" had to read in school textbooks how a white person gets washed ashore in a deserted island to which he brings civilization and order with the use of a gun and other components of European material culture salvaged from his ship which had sunk off the coast. This was not merely fiction, but an effective means of political socialization of both the natives — particularly the elite — and those who were destined to rule and "civilize" them.

This encompassing idea of civilizing the natives also manifests itself clearly in the European (particularly the British) explorations in the Pacific. Whenever they visited an island an attempt was made to release a few dogs, goats, and other domesticated animals. The expectation was that when European settlements began to emerge in these places in larger numbers in the future, through the reproductive power of these pioneering animals there would be "civilized" European (and familiar) animals for the agents of civilization to eat as well as to help in hunting the less civilized native animals, and I suppose people. In a sense this was one of their first attempts towards introducing civilization to "heathens."

The idea of access to civilization through language was the predominant signifier that marked the existence and nature of the local elite during the peak of colonialism, and in the dawn of post-colonial domination of native socio-economic reality by these elites. Thus the colonial language — English — became a marker of an elite socio-political class, and by extension a clearly defined boundary which kept away the native masses. It also became a weapon of resistance to be used against those who attempted to breach the boundaries of this class, while the non-English speakers became a class of second class citizens. In this sense language was also a method of exclusion.

Language Imperialism in Operation:

Two experiences from my early childhood are still clearly etched in my mind. In the first incident I failed my grade one entrance examination to enter Trinity College in Kandy because I could not understand the questions set in English, and could not fathom the patterns of the English flowing script which I was supposed to copy. The fact that I did well in the Sinhala section of the examination was of no relevance. In the second instance my attempted admission to St. Anthony's College in Katugastota failed for similar reasons. This time I did not understand a single word the priest who interviewed me in English asked me. All this happened in the late 1960s, well after "independence," and after Sinhala was made the language of instruction for Sinhala students, including in these two schools.

At that time I did not have the words to describe or identify this experience. It was merely a failure. However, I was always acutely aware of the reasons for that failure, which is why I believe the incidents are a permanent part of my memory. But today I would suggest that the primary reason for my experience, if not the only one was the operation of language imperialism. This was a clear process of exclusion firmly enforced by the agents of the elite class I have already identified. In their perception I was a "godaya" or an uncultured lout with no access to English, to the networks of the elites, and to the socio-cultural system they represented. My presence in these bastions of post-colonial elitism would essentially have polluted their cultural and social purity, and as importantly, I may have actually learned the language and become a threat to their way of life.

I would like to explore this final point in some detail. When I suggested that language was a method of exclusion it was not merely a method of social exclusion. It was also a method of economic exclusion. It was through language that the native elite gained access to the civil service and the professions under colonialism. It was also through language that they retained these and other such privileges in post-colonial society. Or rather, it was by denying English language education to the majority of the populace that the native elite managed to continue enjoying the special privileges they had accumulated since the colonial days.

As we know this situation changed markedly after "independence," particularly after Sinhala was declared the language of the state (and that was also at the expense of alienating the Tamil minority). However, even today many aspects of the economy are controlled by language imperialism. This is particularly visible in the private sector which almost exclusively works in English. This is also due to the fact that many of the private sector enterprises are engaged in international commerce, and English is the working language of that field. The reason why English and French are the most widely used international languages is also a legacy of colonialism. That is, France and England controlled the largest empires in the period immediately prior to the process of de-colonization, and their languages continued to dominate international trade and communication.

On the other hand, the organization of the Sri Lankan education system is such that adequate English language training is not received by those from rural areas and small towns. Even in the cities it is only a few schools that offer effective and functional English language training. Those who receive such education are mostly from the cities, and with access to elite networks (eg., those ubiquitous old boys' and girls' associations) that would help them locate placements in the competitive job market.

As a result many undergraduates who graduate from Sri Lankan universities enter the teaching profession or other government employment, or the lower rungs of the private sector which do not require English. One of the most common answers I receive from undergraduates when I ask why they do not apply for private sector employment is: "Kaduwa nethi nisa kepila yanawa" (කඩුව තැති තිසා කැපිලා යනවා). "Kaduwa", which literally means the sword, is Sinhala slang for English. What the above response literally means is that because they do not have the sword, they get cut off. They do not get cut off by the sword they do not have, but by the sword others do have! In other words the lack of English excludes them from relatively lucrative and perceivably upward mobile employment. In practice this also keeps the middle class and urban dominated social space as well as the economic space of the elite free of competition from other less affluent classes.

In terms of the perception of the English educated elite the primary factor involved in the social construction of the "godaya" is the godayas' alleged lack of control over the English language. This specifically refers to their alleged use of "broken English" and mispronunciation. Taken in this sense, language imperialism functions as a weapon (a real sword ?) used against those attempting to breach the boundaries of the social elite.

However, in strictly functional terms such allegedly inelegant use of English does not necessarily subvert the primary purpose of language — communication. "Broken English", which usually refers to grammatically incorrect use of language, under most circumstances manages to impart the desired meaning. The situation is relatively similar in terms of mispronunciation. Take for instance the Sinhalas' propensity to mix up "f" and "p" sounds in English. When one of my school mates used to talk about "swimming fools" and "bloody pools" he was actually talking about "bloody fools" and "swimming pools." However, taken in its proper context, there was no confusion or discommunication. After all "the bloody pools were swimming in the SSC swimming fool." Those

of us who had mastered English to a reasonable extent at that time realized the functional impossibility of a "pool" swimming inside a "fool." Through that realization my friend communicated a meaning to us irrespective of his mispronunciation.

Thus the short-term subversion of standardized language by those who are attempting to learn it is deemed horrendous only by the elite who are threatened by others learning it in the long run. The language oriented jokes popular among English educated elite circles is a clear manifestation of language imperialism as a weapon. It works to eliminate people's desire to learn the language through ridicule, and it also clearly demarcates people who have already breached their social space as inferiors. For instance the George E de Silva jokes popular among the English educated classes in Sri Lanka up to about the 1950s were based on de Silva's alleged misuse of English. According to one joke, a proposal was presented in the Municipal Council of Kandy to build a public urinal. At this point de Silva is alleged to have stated: "Why only a urinal? Why not an arsenal as well?"

Given the extent of de Silva's legal training, which at that time had to be done in the English medium, it is not likely that in reality he would have unwittingly authored the numerous "howlers" attributed to him. In fact as Siriwardena suggests, many of these jokes were invented by Cox Sproule, a Kandy lawyer of Burgher descent (Siriwardena 1994). However, these jokes make perfect sense as weapons of language imperialism and as a method of exclusion. De Silva, a Sinhala member from the Rada caste had breached the social space of two elite circles: that of the Kandyan aristocracy dominated by the Govigama caste and the community of lawyers practicing at the Kandyan Police Court dominated by Dutch Burghers. De Silva could not be kept out of these circles; he had already come in precisely because he had mastered the language. Thus the claims of his alleged misuse of language was a last resort — to mark him as a social inferior despite his forced entrance into a hitherto "civilized" social space. Socially, he was still excluded.

Ridicule and jokes usually work in enforcing relatively complete exclusion. Many undergraduates I have talked to, are afraid to use English for the sake of practice even within the university community because they do not want to be the butt end of jokes. The possibility of becoming ridiculed has essentially destroyed many of these young people's confidence in attempting to learn English, despite being aware of the fact that this language is the only means of access to certain economic and social spaces under the prevailing conditions. Such de-

stroyed confidence has found refuge in parochial nationalist claims and demands that "independent" people should not learn the language of the imperialists. However, it is no longer merely the language of the imperialists. It is more accurately the language of the international community from which parochial politics as well as language imperialism have effectively kept the masses away.

Colonial Literature and the Continuing Colonization of the Mind:

Thus far I have discussed the the manner in which language imperialism operates to exclude certain categories of people from privileged economic and social spaces. In conclusion I would like to draw attention to how the English language teaching and colonial literature continue to colonize the minds of the allegedly independent Sri Lankans. I would merely offer two examples.

Recently the five year-old daughter of a friend of mine insisted that I look at a picture she had drawn. She had sketched with a pencil a house with a chimney that looked remarkably like the English cottages we had seen in post cards and some primary school readers of a different era such as the Radiant Way. A neat road lined with what looked like pine trees led to the house. A car was parked in front of the house, and a man was standing next to it. When I asked her what the picture depicted, her answer was quick: "This is farmer John, this is farmer John's farm, and this is farmer John's car." Not soon after this incident 13 farmers in Sri Lanka's dry zone committed suicide because they could not come to terms with their existential dilemmas. Their reality was very different from farmer John's. However, this middle class child was growing up partially in a fantasy world, the world of farmer John. And if her parents decide to send her to one of the more expensive "International Schools" in the city her world may look as neat and sweet as farmer John's. The curriculums of most international schools are so British-centric that the content of education makes no reference to Sri Lankan reality. Even the study of weather patterns means the study of weather patterns in England, Wales and Scotland. Within such a context the world of Siripala "gamarala" (ගමරාල - farmer) will have no or very little space in her imagination

The second case I want to comment on involves a senior university lecturer from a rural background keenly interested in Sinhala literature. He was fascinated by Shakespeare even though he had not read any of his sonnets or plays. Well, that really did not matter because if you want to enter the social space of the English educated elite you are supposed to acknowledge the bard's greatness. He was also interested in translating the material which he had not even read into Sinhala. Since I have an interest in the idea of translations, I suggested that he should begin by translating selected short stories from South America and Africa, since most Sinhala readers would be able to relate to the social contexts in which they were set much more easily. As such, I believed such translations would be monumentally more interesting than King Lear or Othello in translation. But he would have none of it. His final words to me placed the colonized mind in its proper context: "Whatever they do those Mexicans and Nigerians cannot write great novels or plays. Shakespeare is different. After all he wrote universal literature. You feel like crying when you read them" (මොනවා කලත් මෙක්සිකන් කාරයින්ටයි නයිජීරියන් කාරයින්ටයි වැදගත් නවකථා, නාටා ලියන්න බැහැ. ෂේක්ස්පියර් ඒවගේ නෙමෙයි. එයා ලිවේ විශ්ව සාහිතාය. අත්තටම ඒවා කියවද්දි ඇඬෙනවා.) Sure, but it is universal literature only because we have been told so for generations, and only because our minds are still colonized. The pity of it is that this colonized frame of mind is likely to deny us the works of Pablo Neruda, Carlos Castaneda, Chinua Achebe, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Ariel Dorfman and an entire spectrum of world literature in translation. But we will continue to worship Shakespeare, and learn how white folks civilized the world from Defoe.

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The Reality of Post-terror Societies: Living with Torturers and Murderers

"They will be ashes, but with meaning;
Dust they will be, but dust in love."

Introduction: The Desire for Justice:

The words of the 17th century Spanish poet Francisco de Quevedo quoted above are particularly relevant to contemporary societies of terror. Irrespective of how certain individuals had been murdered or disappeared, memories of them will remain with survivors. While such memories are part of the community's consciousness, there will always be an expectation of justice. Approximately one moth after the discovery of mass graves at Suriyakande (see essay #1) in January 1994, the father of one of the students who disappeared from the Embilipitiya area made the following observation:

"I will not rest my case till the truth prevails. We don't want those murderers to go free." (Sunday Times, 13 February 1994)

This father's expectation is a reasonable one as are countless similar expectations of other survivors. Such expectations have to be placed within the context of not merely societies of terror per se, but more specifically in the context of prolonged or subverted justice, expectations of revenge, and the need to cope with trauma in societies of terror. My intention in this brief essay is to understand the fundamental interrelationships between these concerns by focusing on the experiences of post-terror Chilean and Sri Lankan societies.

Living with Torturers and Murderers:

There is a vast gulf between the need for justice and the actual realization of such expectations. Almost all societies of terror provide us with examples of situations where justice has been denied or subverted. For instance, only a very few people directly or indirectly responsible for war crimes and genocide in Nazi Germany were ever brought to trial. No one in Pol Pot's Cambodia was ever tried for the murder of hundreds of thousands of Cambodian people. The situation is similar in South American societies of terror such as Chile and Argentina, and thus far in Sri Lanka as well. People's desire for justice in a formal sense is usually manifested in the form of commissions of inquiry appointed by rulers who ascend to power after the fall of tyrants or dictatorial regimes.

Generally speaking, many of these commissions are however facades elaborately ritualized for the benefit of the international community, and in particular donor nations. Thus the Human Rights Task Force appointed by the Sri Lankan government in September 1992 issued a public statement detailing the parents' allegations regarding the abductions in Embilipitiya. It also identified some of the accused. However, while the UNP government was in power nothing particularly constructive which would have genuinely satisfied the survivors' desire for justice transpired. A major reason for such inaction was the fact that many of those who authorized government-sponsored terror activities were still in power at the time the Commission was initially activated.

Similarly, when President Patricio Aylwin of Chile established the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation in April 1990 its mandate was clearly restricted. It was merely supposed to elaborate on the conditions under which opponents of the Pinochet regime were murdered, and to decide whether compensation to the next of kin should be paid. Victims of torture in prisons and centres of detention were not eligible, and provisions were made to withhold testimony received from the public if necessary (Graham-Yooll 1991: 3).

In the case of Chile such calculated caution verging on subverting the public's desire for justice was understandable in the context of larger socio-political realities of Chilean society. In Chile, as elsewhere in South America, the most entrenched and powerful institutions are the Catholic Church, and in particular the military. Democracy in such places was in reality merely a rare and conditional luxury people enjoyed at particular periods in time. In most such cases external pressure played as important a role as did internal politics. But the military was there to stay. The only difference was that whenever a semblance of democracy was introduced to such places, the military might elect to withdraw to the background of centre stage politics. Even then it usually retained much of its authority and ability to intervene. Under such circumstances justice is always a conditional and subverted commodity. Justice would be available only to a selected few, and even that only as far as such justice would not antagonize the military.

Thus it would appear that many kin of the murdered and survivors of torture in Chile and similar societies of terror would never receive any justice in a formal sense. What this means is that if achieving justice is a precondition for collective healing and coping in societies of terror, that healing process cannot be initiated — certainly not formally and legally. However, certain mechanisms of collective healing and collective justice may be available in such societies. People in Chile for instance know that justice is conditional and limited. As such many tended to view even the interim victory and establishment of democracy as a manifestation of justice.

On the other hand, certain symbolically powerful incidents also tend to be viewed as manifestations of collective justice, revenge, and healing. For example, I would suggest that what happened to General Pinochet at the inauguration of President Aylwin and his constitutionally elected government in March 1990 is a classic example of this nature. Pinochet rode in an open car, in uniform, brimming with confidence, and waving to the people whom he and agents of his regime had tortured and terrorized for sixteen years. Suddenly the people shouted "murderer," and kept on repeating the word like a loud chant until he left the area. Moreover, he had to utilize an open umbrella to protect himself from a pelting of tomatoes and rotten fruit. The general and many of his agents of torture and death may never be brought to justice in the legal sense. However, I would suggest that the population, aware of that reality, achieved a certain degree of justice, revenge and collective healing from the incident described above.

In contrast, the Sri Lankan situation has some clear differences in respect of potential for justice. For instance, despite the growing importance of the military in the context of counter-guerrilla operations in the North East and the South, it does not have the kind of entrenched authority which is typical of military institutions in South American societies. Thus a change of government with a strong mandate from the people can institute a much more effective commission of inquiry than in Chile — at least in theory. In fact, after the new People's Alliance government took office in August 1994, some of the people accused of abducting 16 of the 31 students who disappeared from Embilipitiya have been produced before the courts (Lankadipa, 21 September 1994/ 23 September 1994). It remains to be seen however, whether such prosecutions and investigations would be the norm or the exception in the future.

It must also be noted that the killers and torturers in Sri Lanka were not merely agents of the state. Tamil guerrillas as well as JVP operatives in the South are also candidates. Thus any commission of inquiry should ideally investigate human rights violations by all such groups. However, whether such a commission can be sustained for a reasonable period of time is debatable, particularly in the context of the criminalization of politics and the entrenchment of an omnipotent gun culture in Sri Lanka over the last seventeen years.

Moreover, the global patterns of politics of general amnesties have to be kept in mind as well. In all societies of terror most people accused of terror and political violence have been "pardoned" by the declaration of general amnesties. This is particularly the case in societies where military institutions are well entrenched and were the primary culprits of terror activities. Even in Sri Lanka, despite the theoretical potential for justice, this is the most likely outcome. There are simply too many people involved, many of them well connected military officials and politicians.

More importantly, one of the unstated preconditions or early outcomes of the peace talks between the new government and the LTTE would likely to be a general amnesty to LTTE activists. If they are offered an amnesty — as is quite likely — irrespective of the horrendous acts of terror and political violence they have carried out, there will be no moral or political grounds to investigate and prosecute murderers and torturers in UNP death squads, the armed forces, the police, among JVP activists and among politicians. Thus I would suggest that the Embilipitiya trial referred to above would most probably be a show trial staged for the benefit of the international human rights and donor communities as well as to enhance the image of the new government in the short run. This is likely to be one of the few, if not the only such trial, that would ever take place in Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, in terms of responsibilities and obligations, there are some clear differences between insurgent groups such as the JVP and the LTTE and elected governments such as the UNP. An elected government is bound by moral and legal requirements to protect its citizens. Sometimes, violence in the form of war may have to be utilized for that purpose. However, there is a vast difference between the deaths of civilians in combat situations and mass executions. The latter category of violence simply should not be pardonable. Insurgent groups on the other hand are not bound by most such obligations. But even for them, the combat vs. massacre differentiation should apply. For instance, it

would be highly problematic to offer an amnesty to the LTTE murderers who massacred over a hundred people in Anuradhapura sacred city in the 1980s or to the military and other armed units which were responsible for wiping out entire communities in both the North-East and the South.

The problem with such blind amnesties is much more than a question of justice or their place in history. More importantly, they would be a negative lessons for the future. Under any future reign of terror, would-be murderers and torturers would be even less hesitant to engage in such activity if there is an established tradition of evading prosecution and punishment. This perhaps is one of the strongest reasons why such prosecutions should continue.

Irrespective of the arguments and counter arguments that can be offered in this regard, the larger reality is that most people responsible for torture and political murder would never be brought to justice in Sri Lanka or elsewhere. Thus a typical feature of societies of terror is the reality of an unenviable coexistence between torturers and the tortured or the repressors and the repressed, even if the actual period of physical terror had ceased. Clearly mental torment will continue. This is the reality effectively captured in Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden*, also known as *Scars on the Moon* (1990). Dorfman portrays Pauline as a victim of torture who recognizes her torturer, and attempts to force him to confess. He does not, and she cannot prove her case "legally" even though her husband is head of a commission collecting testimony on such cases. Only the torturer and his victim are aware of the real nature of the past that bind them together. In Dorfman's play even though the victim was able to confront her torturer, and establish for a brief moment a relationship in which the torturer was at her mercy, he did not repent for his crimes (Dorfman 1991: 19).

The conclusion of the play is significant. It is deliberately vague. But that vagueness only varies between two variables: Unable to get a genuine confession, Pauline has to let Jorge, the torturer go free, and later it is shown that Jorge, Pauline and her husband Gerardo continue to coexist and move within the same social circles (Dorfman 1991: 5-20). Alternatively, she kills Jorge but the memory of her past continue to haunt her when she keeps on seeing illusions of his image (Dorfman 1991: 19-20). Whatever the end of the play actually may be, the point it attempts to make is valid for all societies of terror: many people may be destined to live with their tormentors for the rest of their lives. On the other hand, even if survivors manage to successfully seek justice or revenge, psychological torment will be part of their lives as far as memories of torture and political murder continue to exist.

Mechanisms of Coping: Blaming the Victims:

Given the reality of having to live with their torturers, survivors in societies of terror come up with sustained and seemingly rational explanations to come to terms with their experiences as well as to seek justice. They are however not merely accidental incidents as the insulting of Pinochet described earlier. Such mechanisms of coping are consciously resorted to by individuals or communities. At this stage I merely want to present some examples of this phenomenon from the Sri Lankan experience. Clearly, the context in which such trends emerge is the inability to utilize the usual mechanisms of justice, healing or coping. Besides, experiences of sustained terror are themselves abnormal. On the other hand it is pertinent to realize that in societies of terror the concepts of justice and revenge are interchangeable, particularly to survivors. Alternatively the differences in meaning between the two concepts would merely depend on who defines them.

Given the thousands of Sri Lankans tortured and otherwise psychologically affected by torture and terror in general, only a mere one hundred come for psychological counselling at a relatively better known clinic in Colombo. This however, is one of the larger turnouts. Legal remedies are also not readily available, as agents of law and order were themselves a component of the terror-generating apparatus. Even compensation has mostly been paid on a selective basis. On many occasions compensation programmes initiated by the UNP government tended to pay compensation to victims of JVP violence, while many who suffered at the hands of state-sponsored death squads and torturers were denied such "benefits."

Within such a context one of the most consistent mechanisms of coping used by victims is to blame themselves or the victims. Many of the relatively few who come for psychological counselling tend to blame themselves for what happened to them as well as for their inability to save their loved ones. Preliminary interviews in Southern, North Western and North Central Provinces have indicated the emergence of the same tendency. Let me briefly document one case from the North Western Province. One night in September 1989 government-sponsored death squads killed the two sons, one of two daughters and wife of

Sumanapala[9]. He and the eldest daughter escaped because they were not at home that night. Sumanapala later surrendered to the military, and was released from detention after three months consequent to investigations which revealed that he was not associated with the JVP. He also claims that he was not involved in JVP activity even though the movement had forced him to put up posters near the small kiosk he owned in the village. In his family only he and the eldest daughter survived. After much difficulty and time he has received some monetary compensation from the state for his loss.

After the physical wave of violence ebbed somewhat he began to be possessed regularly by six deities. They were Suniyam, Waduru Kali, Sohon Kali, Riri Kali, Ratna Kalukambili, and Badra Kali. Similarly, the eldest daughter who survived gets possessed by Pattini. I shall discuss the significance of these specific deities later. At this point I would like to place in context the ideas of justice and revenge expressed by Sumanapala and his elder daughter. In general conversation both seem to have come to terms with their loss. Ideas of revenge and justice do not emerge in their narratives. Instead they have framed their loss within a karmic paradigm, and have blamed the victims themselves for their plight.

In this context what is important initially is the nature of the killing. The four victims were shot inside their home, and the house was set on fire. Sumanapala claims that the reasons for their fate was a crime the four victims had committed in their previous lives. According to his narrative they were born as members of the same family in the previous life as well. In that life the four victims had tortured four birds, killed them, and had set them on fire inside their own nest. In this life they paid for their earlier sin. In this case as well as in some others that I have recorded, there is a clear structural similarity between specific incidents of terror and death and the narratives of the karmic past.

If an expectation of justice and revenge is absent in their own explanations, and they seem to have accepted their fate, the exact opposite is evident in the structure and the experiences of possession. For instance, all the deities that possess Sumanapala are malevolent deities closely associated with revenge and destruction. Many people seek their intervention when they want to punish enemies or seek denied justice. However, it must be noted that people seek their intervention for other, more routine purposes as well.

Pattini, who possesses the daughter, is also closely associated with justice and revenge. For instance, according to one myth associated with Pattini, the original fire and drought in the human world was caused by her anger. Moreover, in mythic times Pattini is believed to have set fire to the city of Madurai, in which the evil were destroyed and the good were spared (Obeyesekere 1984: 43). Significantly, under possession one of the consistent themes that emerged was revenge. For instance, Pattini (through the voice of the young woman) repeated the following words consistently during the half-hour she was possessed:

> "This little girl has suffered much. I know who the culprits are. They will all be punished once this girl is mature enough to wield all the powers of Pattini."

Thus I would suggest that the whole phenomenon of possession in this case was manifested in the context of lack of justice and the desire of the survivors to seek justice and revenge through other means. Under possession of Pattini the young woman also claims the ability to locate missing persons. Some people whose kin had disappeared during the terror come to her for help. I interviewed the father and daughter when the news of their powers was beginning to reach beyond the village. Some of those who came to seek such advice were from distant villages and towns. I would speculate that after a period of time more people would visit her in attempting to locate their disappeared kin or to ascertain their fate.

Mechanisms of Coping: Avenging Ghosts:

In this discussion I use the words ghosts to refer to the Sinhala words "holman" or "avatara." These are considered to be lowly spirit forms capable of malevolent activity. In parts of Southern Sri Lanka a category of ghost stories has emerged in which the ghosts are believed to be people who were murdered during the terror. At this point I merely want to illustrate people's desire for justice (which they had hitherto not received) as clearly manifested in one of these narratives. In general I would suggest these narratives are also mechanisms of coping and remembering.

Of the many types of ghost stories I have collected from newspapers and field studies there is a special category of narratives in which those who experience ghosts or apparitions happen to be members of the security forces. in this discussion I will only consider one example. Let me hasten to note that security personnel in most cases are not

members of the community, and that on many occasions they were the primary source of terror and violent death. The particular narrative I am concerned with deals with a group of soldiers who were patrolling the streets one night. On seven occasions that night they were showered with stones that never actually hit them. The first stone-throwing occurred at a place where the head of a disappeared youth was found. The last occasion when this activity was reported was in the vicinity of the house where the beheaded youth once lived. Despite having weapons the soldiers were terrified, and they could not find any human culprits around. The next morning three of the five soldiers were down with fever (Irida Lankadipa, 1 Nov 1992).

Note that the stones were thrown at patrolling troops and never at ordinary villagers. This, I believe, is indicative of the community's ability to clearly identify the primary culprits of their problems and their associated desire to punish them. But the stones themselves did not actually hit the soldiers, and their weapons obviously were of no use. This, I suggest, reflects the community's wish for "proper" justice as opposed to the wild justice that was meted out to them by soldiers and death squads as well as JVP activists. The act of stone-throwing was a mere reflection of the need for justice, not justice itself. The non-utility of weapons is indicative of the fact that when the time comes guns cannot help the culprits, a notion closely associated with Buddhist karmic principles. Getting frightened and falling sick is clearly indicative of what the community construed as the guilt of soldiers, and by extension, of the state.

Conclusion: The Revenge of the Deities or the Secular Legal System?

What I have briefly described above are merely two examples of coping and the clear existence of a desire for justice irrespective of the fact whether such desires are visible or entertained by the secular legal system. Already, there are many indications that people have resorted to numerous traditional methods of coping and seeking revenge and justice as the apparatus of justice in the secular world seem to have failed. Many of these methods are located within the traditional belief system and popular or spirit religion. For instance many people have visited Kali and Suniyam shrines to seek revenge against known, unknown and suspected enemies for the murders and torture of their loved ones. Others have got experts to compose *was kavi*, a kind of verse. It is believed that the misfortunes described in the lyrics will befall the targeted enemies.

Many others have consulted spirit mediums such as *anjanam* experts to ascertain the fate of the disappeared. On some occasions the survivors seeking such advice have been told that their disappeared loved ones are dead, and on occasions descriptions of how they were killed were also provided. At the same time such methods have also provided advice on merit transferrals and other spiritual activities that would benefit the deceased relatives in the other world, as well as what deities should be consulted in order to seek revenge, justice or retribution. Thus ultimately, whatever the response of the state may be in satisfying survivors' and victims' expectations of justice, there will always be murderers and torturers who would continue to live among those whom they have tormented. In fact, most of them will never be punished by a secular legal system. Under such circumstance the only solace available to many people may be traditional methods of coping and seeking justice.

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8

The Social Construction of Multi-Phobia: One Manifestation of Sinhala Nationalism and the Rejection of the Plural Society

Introduction:

The average person familiar with elements of psychology would perhaps be confused as to what this particular mental ailment is since no references to it may be found within the pages of psychology texts. This phobia is a political condition that is found among sections of the Sinhala population. More specifically it is manifested within sections of the middle class Sinhala bourgeoisie. Basically, those who suffer from this phobia argue that Sri Lanka is not a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural or multi-linguistic society. This denial of Sri Lanka's pluralistic reality is an extension of Sinhala nationalism, even though all Sinhala nationalists do not necessarily suffer from this phobia.

It should be noted that Sinhala nationalism is not manifested in a simple unilineal manner. Rather it is manifested in many different ways, and the articulation of the ideas identified above is merely one of these manifestations. My intention in this essay is to attempt to understand the reasons for this phobia, or the manner in which it has been socially constructed.

The Structure of Multi-Phobia:

In 1993 addressing a group of predominantly young Buddhist students, Tilak Karunaratne, then a member of the Sri Lankan parliament made the following observation:

> "The Sinhala Buddhists in this country have to face severe harassments. 68% of the people in this country are Sinhala Buddhists. I do not know why this country has to be referred to as multi-religious and multi-ethnic when there are so many (Sinhala Buddhist) people living there." (Divayina, 9 March 1993)[10]

Karunaratne has articulated the most basic elements of multi phobia. These elements can be identified as follows: The majority of the people in this country are Sinhala Buddhists. As such, there is nothing called a multi-ethnic or multi-religious society. Therefore Sri Lankan society is a Sinhala Buddhist one. However, the most articulate self-description of multi phobia to date, I believe, has come from Sinhala poet and novelist Gunadasa Amarasekera. In his collection of essays titled "Ganaduru Mediyama Dakinemi Arunalu" (In the Midst of Darkness I See the Dawn), Amarasekera presents the following ideas (quoted in translation):

> "— If we are to achieve this (presumably national liberation) successfully, we must first stop repeating the falsehood that the country is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural state which was taught to us by the British.
>
> The Tamil people in this country have a specific culture and identity of their own. Muslim people also have their own culture and identity. But those cultures or identities are not contradictory to the culture and identity of the Sinhala people. More accurately, those cultures and identities are versions of the culture and identity of the Sinhala people. To understand this fact scientific research is not necessary. Let us consider the culture of the Muslims who live here. Is that the culture of Muslims who live in Arab lands? Do the Muslim people who live among us believe that adulterers should be stoned to death or thieves' hands should be chopped off? Those who live amongst us are Sinhala Buddhist Muslim people. In the North (a reference to predominantly Tamil areas) there are Sinhala Buddhist Tamil people who are better than us (i.e., better Sinhala Buddhists!). The reason for this is because over the last two thousand years those people have lived under the shadow of the Sinhala Buddhist majority. If this is to continue and we want to live in harmony, we should first eliminate the half-truth that this country is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious one. We must believe that our society consists of many groups such as Sinhala, Tamils and Muslims who are ultimately derived from one major cultural heritage. If 'Sinhala Buddhist' is an unpleasant term to identify that cultural heritage, we must find another term for it." (Amarasekera 1988: 23)[11]

Obviously Amarasekera's argument regarding ethnicity and ethnic identity is different from the more conventional and extremist Sinhala position where non-Sinhala groups are considered alien, and therefore

have no real rights in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is specifically considered to be the country of the Sinhalas.[12] Amarasekera on the other hand recognizes the non-Sinhala Buddhist groups as extensions of the Sinhala Buddhist cultural heritage. Despite the obvious influences different cultures and religions have had on each other, to classify them as extensions or versions of Sinhala Buddhist cultural heritage is a bizarre misunderstanding of facts. On the other hand, such an idea is not historically or anthropologically viable.

Instead of the more conventional outright rejection of non-Sinhala groups, Amarasekera suggests a somewhat paternalistic but nevertheless an almost total assimilation of all groups within the larger identity of Sinhala Buddhists. He is only willing to allow a marginal recognition of distinctiveness. His assertiveness is based on a descriptive and prescriptive assumption that there already has been a substantial degree of assimilation. However, such a complete level of assimilation has not occurred, except in certain sections of the population, and given the realities of Sri Lanka, such an assimilation is generally unpractical, and particularly unacceptable to minorities (Perera 1991).

Amarasekera's ideas presented above are important in that they present certain striking features of multi-phobia as well as some of the dominant features of the more parochially interpreted Sinhala nationalism emanating from urban middle class sections. In terms of this logic, referring to Sri Lanka as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious or multi-cultural society, is not acceptable because the majority of the people in the country are Sinhala. As such it should be a Sinhala Buddhist country.

I would suggest that what has happened here is the misunderstanding of analytical categories or tools of modern social sciences (eg., multi-ethnic etc.) as a result of imposing unnecessary emotional value on such categories. The point however is whether we use these analytical categories or not, there are different ethnic, religious, and cultural groups in Sri Lanka, not to mention the regional, caste, and class divisions within the larger Sinhala society itself. In this sense Sri Lankan society clearly is a plural society whether we accept it or not. After all, by merely insisting that Sri Lanka is not a multi-ethnic or multi-religious society, the non-Sinhala Buddhist people are not likely to vanish.

On the other hand the written documents from Sri Lanka's distant past such as stone inscriptions refer to the existence of many different groups of people at different periods of time. For instance historians such as Gunawardana have shown that even in Brahmi inscriptions, the

earliest written records in Sri Lanka, there are references to group identities on the basis of lineage, and religious identities. In other similar inscriptions there are references to groups such as Kabojha, Milaka and Dameda, which may be tribal groups (Gunawardana 1990: 46). The clear identification of such groups would indicate that their identities were well established. This is also indicative of the fact that Sri Lankan society has been a plural society for a considerable period of time, even though the component groups of that society and the nature of their identities have changed over time.

On the other hand, by mere experience any average villager or any person from the major cities and market towns would recognize the existence of different groups of people in this country. Obviously that is why the Sinhala language has words to refer to them — Christians, Tamils, Hindus, Muslims, Govigama, Karawa, Kandyan, and so on. More importantly, these terms of reference are not necessarily framed within an antagonistic or derogatory idiom. All this points to a recognition of the entrenched pluralism of this country. However, such recognition does not automatically lead to the articulation of such recognition by using analytical categories or tools imported from Western-derived social sciences. In fact, in general conversation a Sinhala may refer to Sri Lanka as a Buddhist or Sinhala Buddhist country. But that alone is not indicative of multi-phobia, since at the level of popular conscience the reality of plural Sri Lanka clearly exists, as indicated in the various terms of reference identified above. Multi-phobia manifests itself with the clear and conscious rejections of the plural society such as typified by Amarasekera's exercise. Moreover, I would suggest that such endeavours are aimed precisely at subverting the notions of the plural society that exists in the Sinhala popular conscience.

The use of social science categories imported from the West is another reason that has aggravated multi-phobia. Amarasekera's idea that the notions of multi-culturalism and multi-ethnicity are "falsehoods" imposed by the British is a manifestation of the suspicion of modern social sciences. Western-trained social scientists have been attacked in the local press at various points in time, most consistently in the *Irida Divayina* debates of 1984 and 1985, consequent to the publication (in Sinhala) of a series of critical papers challenging some of the conventional ideas associated with the Sinhala identity and past.

This conspiracy mentality and anti-intellectual bias (eg., refer to Amarasekera's statement above which devalues social science research) are integral parts of the middle class oriented nationalism, within which

multi-phobia also manifests itself. On the other hand this conspiracy mentality and anti-intellectualism is understandable in the context of the rapid socio-economic and political changes occurring within the larger Sinhala society, and the relative lack of interventions by local social scientists in Sinhala and Tamil to explain these changes to the masses.

Clearly, Sri Lankan social sciences have not yet evolved into a dynamic field of study rooted in Sri Lankan society and culture. The major reasons for that are the unfortunate lack of enthusiasm among Sri Lankan social scientists in general, the dearth of empirical and theoretical material in the social sciences in Sinhala and Tamil, and the lack of priority in the teaching of social sciences within the university system. As we know more emphasis is given to the teaching of natural sciences and computer technology etc. Interestingly however, the hostility towards Western-derived categories of analysis is only in reference to social sciences, and not in reference to natural sciences, engineering, medicine or computer technology. The reason for this obviously biased perception lies in the fact that it is the social scientists who usually come up with explanations for unpleasant social realities and contradictions, critical analyses of the past, and so on.

However, it should be clear that the mere use of Western analytical tools should not devalue the validity of an analysis if the tools used are suitable to analyze local conditions. Thus since Sri Lanka is a country where many groups live, it is perfectly acceptable to refer to it as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society. This would not invalidate the fact that Sinhala Buddhists are the numerical and political majority, and that others are minorities in different degrees. Even if we substitute local concepts for multi-ethnicity and multi-culturalism the reality of pluralism will continue to remain.

Conclusion:

I would like to conclude this essay by referring to the final suggestions presented by Amarasekera in the quotation above. He suggests that irrespective of the existence of different ethno-religious groups, they are ultimately derived from the Sinhala Buddhist cultural heritage. Then he goes on to say that if "'Sinhala Buddhist' is an unpleasant term to identify that cultural heritage, we must find another term for it" (Amarasekera 1988: 23). I would suggest that "Sinhala Buddhist" is not at all an unpleasant term. It is merely an incorrect one in this particular context.

It is simply inconceivable to use Sinhala Buddhist as a general term to refer to all ethno-religious or linguistic groups in Sri Lanka, due to the analytical problems it presents. While there is evidence that all ethno-religious groups in Sri Lanka have borrowed from each other there is no evidence to suggest that all such groups evolved from one major cultural root. On the other hand, even the term Sinhala Buddhist is inadequate to explain the plural nature of the Sinhala society itself. For instance it does not refer to regional, caste, religious and class differences among Sinhalas themselves. It is merely a general term to refer to Sinhalas who are Buddhists.

It is due to such technical problems that we need value-free analytical tools such as those rejected by sufferers of multi-phobia. What is needed here is a better understanding of the social sciences which these critics have rejected outright, and better communication with the social scientists who have been demonized. However, part of the problem clearly lies with a considerable number of Sri Lankan social scientists themselves, whose critical works do not regularly appear in Sinhala and Tamil. This gives polemicists an opportunity to reinterpret this material in a variety of dubious ways (see essay # 5). If Sri Lankan academics can overcome these problems, it would help victims of multi-phobia understand the social sciences better, and clarify the real utility of the analytical tools that have been re-defined in a polemical manner. More importantly, popularization of social sciences in general is needed if it is to become more useful in the development process as well as if it is to be more pragmatically rooted in Sri Lankan society and culture.

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9

The Attempted Construction of a New Hero: Sinhala and Tamil Appropriation of Ravana

Introduction:

In August 1993 on my way to Anuradhapura I came across an orange colored concrete sign on the outskirts of Wariyapola. As stated in the sign itself it was erected by the Wariyapola Pradeshiya Sabha[13]. It welcomed visitors to the town and stated the following (among other things):

"You are entering the Wariyapola city, which during the reign of King Ravana served as a landing area for the vehicle that travelled at the speed of air—"[14]

Basically, the sign referred to a pre-historic international airport, or in the very least, a military air base! It should be noted that the word Wariyapola, the name of the town, is quite significant in the context of this speculation. "Wa" means air in Sinhala, and "riya" means vehicle, while "pola" refers to a space. Thus the amalgamation of these meanings, in theory could refer to a "place where a vehicle which travelled by air or at the speed of air had landed." Needless to say, I knew what this story was all about, but was nevertheless amazed at the attempted public legitimization or historicization of the Ravana myth. For me, such a public attempt with clear political sponsorship (eg., the sign was erected by a UNP-controlled Pradeshiya Sabha) to legitimize the Ravana myth was a completely new phenomenon in Sinhala society.

As anthropological literature from around the world has shown, certain enduring myths are sometimes resurrected, re-interpreted, historicized and politicized at certain socio-political junctures. What I would like to attempt in this brief essay is to try to understand some of the dynamics involved in such processes by focusing on how the Ravana myth has been used in this manner by Sinhalas and Tamils.

Ravana is one of the chief protagonists in Valmiki's epic *Ramayana*. Various versions of the story have also seeped into the folk lore of many peoples, the Sinhalas, the Thais, the Tamils, and the Balinese among them. Currently it appears that both Sinhalas and Tamils claim Ravana as their own personal ethnic and culture hero. More precisely, certain sections within these two ethnic groups seem to do so. Why?

Constructions of the past (through myths, legends, history or what is understood as history) is essentially a political and moral resource that has become an expedient tool in the hands of politicians, nationalists and scholars (sometimes of course these different agents are the same), who use them for their own political projects involving nationalist, religious or ethnic hegemonic and legitimization processes. In the Sri Lankan context the past is a highly contentious, contested and prized commodity that is often used for contradictory purposes by different, and often mutually antagonistic, groups. This phenomenon is more clearly manifest among the Sinhalas and Tamils when they attempt to justify or legitimize the present on the basis of what they consider to be the authentic past.

The past is also sacred. Nationalist interpretations of the past ideally should not be questioned or reassessed by individuals within or exterior to the group. Such individuals would all be branded as traitors in terms of nationalist discourse and rhetoric. This has already occurred in Sri Lanka, and I believe would continue to occur under similar conditions. The possibility of castigation is one of the main reasons why many Sri Lankan scholars have generally been mute regarding key ("sensitive") issues, and this silence is shockingly evident in the social sciences.

The legend of Ravana has been an enduring one. Moreover, it has been at the centre of quasi-historical research of the academic fringe for some time — at least since the latter part of the 19th century. The question we should pose then is whether in the context of evolving socio-political realities the legend of Ravana has shifted from the obscure academic fringe into the realm of ethnic politics and nationalist rhetoric of Sinhalas and Tamils. In essence this essay will attempt to provide some interim answers to this question.

The Metamorphosis of Ravana in Sinhala Society:

I first came across Ravana as a child in grade three or so through a lesson titled "Dandumonaraya" in my Sinhala language reader. The title of the lesson (in Sinhala) referred to the legendary aircraft Ravana was reputed to have had. This was my first real introduction to the mythical king, as I would assume was the case with many of those in my generation studying in Sinhala. The lesson and the teacher's elaborations noted that Ravana abducted Sita, the beautiful wife of Rama and imprisoned her in Lanka. Rama invaded Lanka with the help of Hanuman, the monkey general and rescued Sita. Clearly, Ravana even though he was supposed to have lived in a place called Lanka (which we were assured was none other than Sri Lanka), was not an absolute Sinhala hero on the model of Dutugemunu or other such kings.

At that time (late 1960s and early 1970s) his characterization was problematic — at least in the middle class conscience. On one level he was perceived as a thug who stole someone else's wife. That was considered to be the kind of thing that decent people did not do. At another level he was a hero because of his heroic military exploits. After all he flew in an aircraft on a secret mission long (really long) before those two Americans called the Wright brothers invented the aircraft. In fact on a number of occasions we were told this. The more clear heroes however, were Rama and Hanuman. They, after all, were the folks who rescued Sita and defeated Ravana. But in an era with no television to visually bombard us with the sleek and airborne exploits of Superman and Batman, Ravana's "Dandumonaraya" surely captured our imagination. I think it was precisely for this reason that he did not completely lapse from our collective memory. What is clear, however, is that except for those in the academic fringe Ravana was not an ethnic hero for the Sinhalas in general.

The first impetus for resurrecting Ravana in Sri Lanka emerged in the latter part of the 19th century. The emergence of such interests coincide with the 1870 re-discovery and excavation of ruins which were claimed to be that of Troy, the fabled city of Homer's epic *Iliad*. The man responsible for this re-discovery was Heinrich Schliemann, an amateur German archaeologist. The basic similarities between Homer's *Iliad* and Valmiki's *Ramayana* prompted these early speculations. A much more sustained effort was made to resurrect Ravana later in the context of the Hela Movement in the 1940 and 1950s. Here, what Hela activists such as Kumaratunga wanted was not so much to resurrect the Ravana myth per se, but to construct a much more ancient and non-Indic genesis for the "true language" of the Sinhalas, which was identified as Hela. Current Sinhala was perceivably contaminated with foreign influences such as Pali, Sanskrit, Tamil and so on. The main aim of the Hela activists was to "purify" Sinhala by purging these foreign influences, and recreate its Hela identity which was believed to have been lost. As part of this endeavour, the Hela activists suggested that the real language of the Sinhalas (Hela) had a clear Sri Lankan genesis, and that it was not of Indian origin.

These perceptions must be placed in the context of the love-hate relationship that the Sinhalas have had with India for a considerable period of time. For instance while many Sinhalas accept certain clear Indian influences such as Buddhism, they are at pains to overlook other influences such as the influence of Tamil on the Sinhala language. However, as part of the Hela project it was necessary to construct a respectable history for the Sinhalas prior to the perceived arrival of Vijaya, the mythical ancestor of the Sinhalas. Current nationalist historiography and popular conventions suggest that Vijaya arrived in Sri Lanka with seven hundred followers on the day the Buddha attained *Nirvana*. Thus as far as Sinhala society is concerned, the resurrection of Ravana came about as an integral part of this overall project. That is, as part of the claim that there was a purely Sri Lankan historical tradition and civilization prior to the arrival of Vijaya and later Indian influences.

Promoters of the Ravana myth have variously identified him as a Yaksha or Raksha king. In Sinhala myth the Yakshas and Rakshas are recognized as the beings inhabiting the land when the first Sinhala settlers landed. They are specifically characterized as non-human and demon-like. In fact, in current usage the word Yaksha and Raksha refer to demons or rather malevolent forms of spirit life who devour or harm humans. Given the nature of this rather strong popular tradition, an attempt has been made by Hela activists to humanize the demonic persona of Ravana in particular and the Yakshas in general (Seneviratne 1991: 49).

The demonic persona of the Yakshas is a strong component of the popular tradition dealing with pre-Vijayan times. On the other hand, while the Hela tradition suggests that Ravana was a Yaksha King, the popular tradition does not always make this connection. However, the demonic characterization of the Yakshas, and the perceivably unethical behaviour of Ravana (exemplified by his abduction of Sita) are two main reasons why Ravana and Yakshas have not been a strong part of the

Sinhala heroic tradition. This has been the case irrespective of the fact that certain place names (eg., Wariyapola and Sita Eliya) allegedly referring to the Ravana story, and some localized myths can be found in various parts of the island. Thus when I asked the villagers in Wariyapola to show me where Ravana's aircraft had landed, they told me that there was no such place, and that the sign referred to above was the work of a group of local politicians. So much for pre-historic airports, not to mention the attempted resurrection of Ravana in Wariyapola.

Ravana has been presented as the most famous of these early Hela (or Yaksha) kings. It has also been suggested that Ravana's mythical capital Lankapura was located within Sri Lanka. One of the main endeavours of activists involved in historicizing Ravana has been the attempted location of this capital. While many names have been suggested, by far the most favored is Sigiriya, the 5th century AD rock fortress believed to be the work of Kashyapa the first. It is suggested that Kashyapa built his fortress among the ruins of Ravana's Lankapura (Seneviratne 1991: 130-136). Interestingly however, a colleague from the University of Colombo who undertook six months of field research in the Sigiriya area did not find any references to Ravana in the numerous oral histories and folk stories that he collected.

Thus in practical terms the Hela project was launched by a group of Sinhala educated middle class elites, and its appeal was rather restricted as a result of its vehemently anti-Sanskritic and anti-Indian bias as well as a result of its vehement criticism of established tradition. Thus the resurrection of Ravana as part of the language nationalism of the Hela activists was relatively unsuccessful. However, the timing of the project is important. It emerged at a time that Sinhala culture and traditions were subverted and devalued in the context of the dominant colonial culture by both the imperialists and their local agents.

I would suggest that, in general, myths in the heroic model are likely to be resurrected at times when a society or a specific group is experiencing sustained stress. Thus when the Indian armed forces intervened in the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict by sending troops to the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka, at least a few attempts were made to resurrect the Ravana myth. Under these circumstances the "hate" component of the love-hate relationship with India which I referred to above was triggered off, and many Sinhalas became overtly anti-Indian. It was in this context that Ariyadasa Seneviratne published his book on the Ravana kingdom in 1991. In it he states that the book was published to honour President Ranasinghe Premadasa. He made a

direct association between Ravana's perceived anti-Indian sentiment and that of Premadasa. He states that Ravana's heroism and sacrifice three thousand years ago was essentially similar to Premadasa's heroism:

> "— With a war of words his Excellency Ranasinghe Premadasa chased away the foreign forces (Indian) sent to this country by the modern Indian avatar of Rama under the false pretext of ushering in peace —" (Seneviratne 1991).

The reason for this attempted resurrection of the Ravana myth had another significant dimension, which is in fact referred to in Seneviratne's statement above. One reason for the Sinhalas' love - hate relationship with India is the strong collective memory of numerous and destructive Indian invasions of Sri Lanka in the island's historical and mythical past. Hence Seneviratne's reference to Rama's avatar. Sinhalas have always been wary of a possible Indian intervention or history repeating itself, and on this occasion their fears seemed to have come true.

On the other hand, the conventional belief among Sinhalas has been that they are descendents of Vijaya, the North Indian prince. At least to some individuals this Indian connection in the origin myth of the Sinhalas became problematic when Indian troops (many of them from North India) were occupying parts of the country. However, this and other attempts at resurrecting the Ravana myth or modifying the Vijaya myth was not strong enough in dislodging the Vijaya myth in the long run. Even at this juncture, when there was some political space for its possible success, the attempt to resurrect the Ravana myth has not been successful. The reason clearly is that the Vijaya myth is too strongly etched in the popular consciousness of the Sinhalas, and that the Ravana myth has never occupied such a preeminent position in the Sinhala consciousness or imagination. Thus among the Sinhalas the politics of Ravana is still predominantly an activity of the academic fringe and a minute section of the middle class.

The Metamorphosis of Ravana in Tamil Society:

As far as the Tamil imagination is concerned, a somewhat similar process seem to have taken place. While a "legendary memory" of Ravana did exist through folklore his image was not constructed in the heroic model. But today all these have changed. Ravana has not only ceased to be a "bad guy", but he has also been appropriated and claimed as their own by Tamils. At least this is what is evident at the level of political and nationalist rhetoric of some sections of the Tamil middle

class, particularly those expatriates resident in Western Europe and North America. What were the circumstances under which this rather interesting metamorphosis took place?

Satchi Ponnambalam, in his polemical book, *Sri Lanka: The National Question and the Tamil Struggle* makes the following observations:

> "The Mahabarata and Ramayana the two great Indian epics written in Sanskrit before the sixth century BC mention the Naga Kingdoms and their conquest by Ravana, the Tamil Yaksha king of Sri Lanka." (Ponnambalam 1983: 17)

> "— According to tradition the Tamils of India and Sri Lanka are lineal descendents of the Naga and Yaksha people. (According to Harry Williams) Nagadipa in the north of Sri Lanka was an actual Kingdom known to historians and the people who occupied it were all part of an immigrant tribe from South India, Tamil people called Nagars — The conclusions that could validly be drawn from the new historical data clearly establish that the ancestors of the present day Tamils were the original occupiers of the island long before 543 B.C. which the Pali chronicles date as the earliest human habitation of Sri Lanka." (Ponnambalam 1983: 18)

The reasons for the use of the legendary Ravana and the Yakshas (and Nagas) as heroes and ancestors of contemporary Sri Lankan Tamils by both Ponnambalam and other nationalist writers like him was to "establish" an early presence for the Tamils in Sri Lanka preceding the legendary arrival of the Sinhalas, symbolized in the contemporary Sinhala imagination by the myth of Vijaya. Interestingly, in the context of deteriorating inter-ethnic relations, a new nationalist myth is constructed by giving an existing legend a new twist. Therefore Ravana who had no real ethnic value 20 years ago is suddenly vested with both ethnic and political value. He is no longer simply Ravana, who snatched Rama's wife Sita, but "Ravana, the Tamil Yaksha king who ruled Sri Lanka even before the arrival of Vijaya."

The construction, or rather the reconstruction of such political myths has to be understood in the context of Sinhala myth-making. Since the latter part of the 19th century certain key elements have been visible components in the Sinhala identity. The Sinhalas are descendents of Vijaya, who is a prince of Aryan origin from North India, and the Sinhalas were the first "civilized" people to arrive in the island. These mythic strands have also become components of the overall myth cluster explaining the origin of the Sinhalas. In the post independence politics of ethnicity this overall myth cluster has been utilized by many Sinhala nationalist politicians to assert the Sinhalas' political hegemony over the island, and to a certain extent to de-legitimize the very existence of Tamils and other minorities in the country. Such positions tend to suggest that Tamils arrived in Sri Lanka much later, and that too as destructive invaders, and therefore they should have no rights or their rights should be secondary to those of Sinhalas.

Thus the new reformulation of the Ravana myth has been to counter the claims generated by Sinhala nationalist myths of this nature. When the Sinhalas trace their ancestry to Vijaya, the Tamils trace theirs much further by using their version of the Ravana myth. The tendency here is clearly to assert that Tamils arrived in Sri Lanka prior to the Sinhalas and therefore they should have equal (or more) rights with the Sinhalas. Here the demand for equality is not based on the notion of individual rights, but on the basis of reconstructed myth.

With the metamorphosis of Ravana among Tamils, the demonic and the malevolent features of Ravana and Yakshas, which were evident in the Sinhala popular tradition have been purged. Or such features simply do not exist in the new Tamil political myth. In this sense the Tamil nationalist myth-makers seem to be following what the Ilela activists attempted in the 1940s and 1950s by attempting to humanize Ravana and Yakshas.

The Tamil appropriation of Ravana however, has to be placed in a much more dynamic and extensive process of myth making. For instance, the mere suggestion that the Tamils have been in Sri Lanka before the Sinhalas has been inadequate. Thus the antiquity of Tamil civilization is traced back to the Mohenjedaro civilization:

> "The Tamils of Sri Lanka are an ancient people.—It was a Dravidian civilization which traced its origins to the people of Mohenjedaro in the Indus valley around 2,000 years before Christ." (Satyendra 1985: 85)

The question that needs to be posed at this point is, to what extent are these new myths popularly accepted in Tamil society. Certain patterns are clearly evident. Most of the writings that attempted these reformulations in the 1980s emerged from the West, and were written by predominantly English-educated middle class elements of the Tamil diaspora. However, the deteriorating inter-ethnic conflict and the entrenchment of political violence within this conflict seem to have motivated some Tamils to accept some of these ideas.

Thus even in 1988, many Tamil-medium students and teachers whom I interviewed were well aware of, and generally receptive to such political myths, despite the fact that at that time they were most readily available only in English (Perera 1992). Even though I could not find any Tamil translations, it seems reasonable to assume that there were many, given the widespread knowledge and belief in these myths among both students and teachers. It was also clear from the limited interviews conducted in 1988 that teachers were a significant channel for the transmission of these myths (Perera 1992). Recent interviews also suggest that in comparison to the general failure in popularizing the resurrected Ravana myth among the Sinhalas, the attempted resurrection of the Ravana myth and a whole range of similarly reformulated political myths seem to have been relatively more successful among Tamils. While the exact extent of this success remains to be seen, I would suggest in conclusion that the relative success of the Tamil project was due to the fact that the attempts were made at a time when there was adequate socio-political space for such dissent, specifically in the context of the aggressive process of Sinhala myth-making. On the other hand until this point Tamils did not have the kind of all-inclusive origin myth the Sinhalas had. Thus there was also a relatively stronger political compulsion to construct such a myth cluster.

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10

The Advent of Grandiose Religiosity and the Flight of Common Sense

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Introduction:

One of the most visible aspects of popular Buddhism over the last decade or so has been the growing popularity of large-scale and expensive rituals or activities aimed at acquiring merit. This trend is most clearly visible among the Buddhist middle class. The fundamental hypothesis underlying this essay is that in the context of evolving socio-economic and political conditions certain routine ritual practices and beliefs have changed, or such changes are being attempted. I would attempt to place the growing expansion of grandiose rituals and other activities of acquiring merit in this context.

Some of these changes within Buddhism have already been documented by scholars such as Obeyesekere and Gombrich (1988). Under specific conditions certain changes in religions are necessary, and if such changes do not take place in keeping with changing conditions, adherents of such unchanging religious systems will resort to other mechanisms of explanation, coping and compensation. Such processes may manifest themselves in attempts to find solace in fringe religious groups or cults. Alternatively, people may abandon their particular faiths altogether or individuals will emerge who will reinterpret aspects of conventional religions in a manner that will offer specific kinds of solace to people who need such comfort. Works such as *Buddhism Transformed* (1988) deal with some of these trends. I shall attempt to embark on this essay by posing the following question:

What is the reason for the emergence of large-scale and expensive meritorious activities among Buddhists, especially among the middle classes? Why do large sections of the same category of people shower temples and monks with expensive gifts and refuse to help the truly disadvantaged?

By focusing on the emergence of grandiose religiosity I do not suggest that it is applicable to the entire Sinhala Buddhist society. At this point in time I merely consider grandiose religiosity as an emerg-

ing socioreligious trend that has a clear basis in class or among those with access to resources. On the other hand, I do not intend to address merely the nature and social context of grandiose religiosity, but also the manner in which certain obvious social and moral obligations — particularly in the context of Buddhist ethics — have been overshadowed or de-emphasized by the expansion of grandiose religiosity within middle class groups. My point of departure and method of analysis of grandiose religiosity will primarily be the manner of participation, explanation and perception of meritorious activities by a group of middle class women I have studied closely. In other words, I shall attempt to understand their perceptions of and explanations for participating in a particular large-scale ritual and other expensive acts of acquiring merit, which I suggest fall into the category of grandiose religiosity.

Advent of Grandiose Religiosity:

Grandiose religiosity is by definition large scale, public, expensive, and usually involves changed or differentially understood perceptions of basic Buddhist principles regarding processes of acquiring merit (පින් - pin). If we consider the construction of spectacular temples and monumental edifices as an expression of grandiose religiosity, then such religiosity is a not a totally new phenomenon. Both Buddhist history in general and Sinhala historiography and myth in particular, offer a variety of examples of this nature such as the *Mahawamsa*'s rather elaborate and magical descriptions of the construction of Lowamahapaya and Ruwanweliseya.

However, what is currently occurring in Sri Lanka is a new phenomenon in the sense that it is almost exclusively an endeavor of the middle class or business elements. Moreover, it has to be understood in the context of both contemporary socio-political and economic transformations, and the manner in which meanings and expectations of rituals are redefined under these changing conditions. On the other hand, grandiose religiosity requires the utilization of relatively large financial and infrastructural resources and efficient organizational networks. To a certain extent this again suggests that the driving force behind this phenomenon are business and middle class elements with time and funds to spare. They also have considerable political clout and social status, or by their actions aspire to achieve enhanced social as well as spiritual status.

An Offering of One Million Lotuses to the Ruwanweliseya:

In 1993 a large number of lotuses[15] were collected from numerous parts of the country, and were offered to the Ruwanweliseya in Anuradhapura. According to participants and organizers the offering was made to bless Buddhism itself, so that it would continue to survive over the next five thousand years. Participants in the ritual, which was generally referred to as "maha pinkama (great meritorious act - මහා පින්කම), came from many parts of the country, but the majority seem to have arrived from Colombo, and other urban centres, as did the organizers.

According to the current myth associated with the ritual, which may very well be the reality, the genesis of the ritual was the dying request of a well-known monk. He requested one of his lay disciples (a successful businessman based in Colombo) to undertake the ritual at the Ruwanweliseya, and to construct a *Sivali maligawa* (a relic chamber enshrining the relics of arahat Sivali). It was believed that this activity would assure the protection of Buddhism from various dangerous forces (noyekuth bhayanaka balavega (නොයෙකුත් භයානක බලවේග) for the next five thousand years. Mysteriously before the ritual, relics of arahat Sivali descended upon the disciple's home in Colombo 7, and he proceeded with the ritual.

Everything about the ceremony and its ritualization has deep symbolic connotations. The timing is important as well. The ritual took place at the time the Tamil insurrection spearheaded by the LTTE continued unabated in the north-east. The flowers were offered to a temple believed to have been built by king Dutugemunu, consequent to his victory over Elara, a king identified as "Damila" or Tamil in the *Mahawamsa*. Dutugemunu, of course, is the pre-eminent culture hero of the Sinhalas, and a symbol of anti-Tamil militancy in the context of contemporary Sinhala nationalist historiography. The lotus, in addition to occupying the highest rank in the stratification of local flowers, is closely associated with Buddhism. For example, according to Buddhist belief, the moment the Buddha was born he took seven steps, and at each step a lotus is believed to have sprung up. Most standing Buddha statues are placed on lotuses. The famed moonstones, or the ornate first step of flights of steps leading to Buddhist shrines, contain a lotus in its innermost half circle, a symbol of nirvana. The lotus is also believed to be symbolic of purity. Moreover, five thousand years is approximately twice the extent of perceived Sinhala history todate.

So what is the meaning of this gigantic ritual? On one level it reflects one of the phobias many Sinhala Buddhists currently have — that the survival of their religion is threatened by Tamil, Christian and "other dangerous forces." But in this particular instance the perceived threat from Tamils, and secondarily from Christians, was of more immediate concern as voiced by some of the participants, and as reflected in some of the symbolic refractions involved. It would then be necessary to locate the ritual within current socio-political dilemmas — real or perceived — faced by the Sinhalas.

In terms of Sinhala historiography current in contemporary nationalist writings and socialization process in Sinhala society, Dutugemunu built the Ruwanweliseya in Anuradhapura after defeating Elara and Tamils. Thus it is not just another shrine. In the Sinhala consciousness, it is an ethnic shrine which marks both a specific Buddhist as well as Sinhala victory over traditional enemies, and a monument symbolizing the ultimate survival of the Sinhala people and the Buddhist religion. Besides, in terms of the current popular understanding of the past, Anuradhapura epitomizes the peak of Sinhala Buddhist power and civilization. Thus it is hardly surprising that a group of middle class Sinhalas would make a pilgrimage to this particular ethnic shrine, armed with lotuses and other paraphernalia, and with a collective memory of conflict with and victory over Tamils.

They were essentially seeking the protection of their religion by invoking the intervention of the pantheon as well as the memory of Dutugemunu's victory. In a sense their pilgrimage was not unlike Dutugemunu's northward march. Instead of a physical war, the folks from the suburbs of Colombo were waging a much safer spiritual war. The fact that this ritual took place at this particular time makes sense when it is placed in the context of the post-Independence ethnic politics and the socio-political destabilization that has occurred in the country as a result of the war being fought in the Northern and Eastern Provinces between the Sri Lankan armed forces and the LTTE.

The million lotuses were placed circumventing the shrine, and indicate an important component of grandiose religiosity — sheer grandness of scale and expense. Clearly this kind of enterprise is the preserve of the rich, and average people can only participate from the margins as many actually did. However, the participants' objective was not only to seek the survival of their religion, but also to acquire personal merit for themselves. I shall attempt to address the issue and mechanisms of acquiring merit from these rituals as this discussion progresses.

Clearly, the ritual was well publicized. The organizer's personal network assured the presence of lotuses and other necessary items. But many other participants donated these materials as well because they were objects and means of acquiring great merit. The grand scale of the event seems to assure people of enhanced possibilities of merit-acquisition. Let me present in translation some of the views that were expressed:

> "What a lot of merit he (referring to the chief organizer and funder) must have acquired from such a grand pinkama."

> "He is likely to go to heaven (as a result of the ritual) — I am sure he has already attained a stage (of enlightenment)."

> "Just being there would have been enough to acquire a lot of merit. It was a grand pinkama."

> "They say that he (the organizer) is likely to achieve nirvana in this life itself—"

In their perception, the mostly middle class participants in the ceremony benefited on two levels:

1) It assured them that their religion would survive for a very long period of time despite the perceived threats.

2) They thought that they acquired much merit by mere participation in this grand event, and that as a result of organizing such events one may even achieve *nirvana* in this life itself.

Let me explore this latter possibility in some detail as this is a recurring theme in grandiose religiosity. Achieving *nirvana*, or any other stage of relative enlightenment is considered extremely difficult by most Buddhists. Besides, it is believed — at least as far as traditional scholastic Buddhism is concerned — that long and tedious processes involving many lifetimes of births, deaths, and re-births must be endured in order to achieve such goals. Not so it seems with grandiose religiosity. One simply organizes or participates in a grand ceremony or ritual, and one's ascent to heaven after death or achievement of nirvana seems assured.

This seems to be an extension of the post-1900 Protestant Buddhist ideology of the Sinhala elites. One of the hallmarks of Protestant Buddhism has been the belief in the lay person's ability to embark on the path to *nirvana* in this life. However, this was deemed possible only through the methodical and rigorous training of the mind by utilizing

techniques such as meditation. In effect grandiose religiosity seem to have re-defined the manner in which one was supposed to achieve *nirvana* or ascend to heaven.

The participants at this ritual whom I interviewed expected one of two outcomes from their participation: they wanted to gain merit to achieve *nirvana* or ascend to heaven after death. Many of them also believed that they would be able to achieve nirvana or some other stage of relative enlightenment in this life itself. All of them also firmly believed that the sheer scale of the ritual guaranteed more merit than would have been possible in a routine ritual such as an offering of alms. But Buddhist doctrinal positions make no explicit associations between the scale of a meritorious act and the amount of merit acquired. However, the belief in such an association sometimes manifests itself within the popular tradition as is the case here.

All participants firmly believed that the chief organizer and the funder of the ritual would have acquired the most merit in keeping with the effort and resources he had expended. And as one of the quotes above indicates, many believed that the organizer had actually achieved a certain stage of enlightenment. Some also stated that they believed he would achieve nirvana in this life itself. The participants also believed that they too acquired a certain amount of merit, not by mere participation, but also due to the offerings they had made, which included lotuses, king coconuts, robes, expensive food items, household utensils, and other material. Many of the participants however, did not accept the possibility that their apparent craving for merit appeared to violate the Buddhist doctrinal position against *thanha* or greed.

Grandiose Religiosity and the Flight of Common Sense:

The participants in this ritual whom I interviewed also belong to an informal circle of friends. Their friendships span many years, and most of them have time and some financial resources to spare. Part of that time and money is spent on attending the kind of grandiose rituals I have described above. Thus far they have attended three such rituals, and all of them have been held at the Ruwanweliseya. In their spare time they also engage in other kinds of activities aimed at acquiring merit. As I have noted already, many of them hope that all these activities would ultimately help them in ascending to heaven or achieving nirvana — in this life itself. These relatively small scale meritorious activities

also have certain elements of grandiose religiosity. For instance they too are relatively expensive, and are usually conducted in temples or retreats outside Colombo.

What usually occurs is somewhat as follows. One of the people in the circle hears about a particularly devout and knowledgeable priest who typically resides in a retreat or temple outside Colombo. His piousness, knowledge of the dhamma, and the belief that he is likely to attain nirvana in this life is always stressed. The location of such priests and their temples outside the city is also important. All of the participants in these meritorious activities live in the city, have made their fortunes and educated their children in it. They also do not want to leave the comforts or the relative security of the city behind. Yet, the city is considered corrupt in terms of spiritual value, and the selected monks are believed to have severed the links to this corrupt system.

On the other hand, pilgrimages are an important part of this ritual cycle. The urbanites make regular pilgrimages to the temples in which the monks who have captured their spiritual imagination reside. Thus if the monks do not reside in a distant place, a pilgrimage in the real sense cannot be organized. In these pilgrimages the participants usually spend at least one night in or in the vicinity of the temple they visit. Thus the temporary, but physical, leaving of the city is an important psychological requirement in this ritual process. It is a kind of purification process in which the participants temporarily sever their ties with the spiritual corruption which the city symbolizes.

The main focus of these pilgrimages is to visit the monk and offer him alms. It is here that grandiose elements of the ritual may be located. For instance, the food items offered are not the average meal one might usually offer to priests in a routine almsgiving. They usually occupy the higher levels of the middle class food hierarchy: Sustagen, apples, grapes, Horlicks, home-made puddings, Danish cookies, and so on. They are usually expensive and foreign (imported) items. Interestingly, comparatively very few local fruits or simple snacks are offered. A similar situation exists in reference to non-perishable items offered. In one instance a businessman from Colombo offered 30 electric kettles to a temple with five monks. The rationale for this behavior is explained by the suggestion that devout monks living in relatively remote areas need good food and other items to sustain themselves in their quest to achieve *nirvana*. However, what is more important is what is not usually articulated. That is the belief that the more expensive the items offered as alms are, the more merit one acquires. In simple terms what

this logic holds is that the offering of a tin of Sustagen is more likely to take one closer to *nirvana* than a bunch of bananas from your garden.

While all these activities take place, one other pattern of behaviour of the interviewees stand out. That is the refusal of most of them to offer even minimal help to people who really need such help. For instance, one participant in the two types of grandiose activities described above was unwilling to buy some school books for a child who could not afford them. Another did not want to offer alms to two Buddhist "nuns" because they lived in a relatively poorer section of the suburb, and because of their beggar-like behaviour, irrespective of the fact that Buddhist monks should ideally beg for their alms and lead a simple life. Many of them also refuse to offer material or financial assistance to beggars, especially if they requested such assistance regularly. Helping such individuals was considered a waste of money. Such people were perceived as "kalakanni" (කාලකන්නි), or those beyond redemption. None of them seemed to perceive that according to Buddhist belief such routine activities also helped people acquire merit, not to mention the moral and social obligations they would be fulfilling.

Another strong belief that inhibited such routine help was the perception that the reason for the less fortunate people to be in that position was the negative karma they had acquired in their previous lives, and that they themselves must engage in meritorious activities to overcome their plight — at least in the next life. Thus at least as far as this particular case is concerned, the expansion of grandiose religiosity seem to be correlated with the flight of commonsense and moral obligations.

Conclusion:

Grandiose religiosity, as I have already stated, manifests itself most clearly within middle class or business elements within Sinhala society. What is important here is not class as such, but access to funds, networks and other resources. Practitioners or participants in grandiose religiosity however do not perceive this trend as an excessive development within the ritual practices of popular Buddhism. However, I would suggest that there is a direct correlation between the emergence of grandiose religiosity and the expansion of economic opportunities within certain sections of the Sri Lankan society as a result of the so called "open economic policies" pursued by the UNP government over the last seventeen years. Generally speaking, one of the most consistent features of the open economy was the relatively uncontrolled growth of consumerism and the lop-sided distribution of income.

Many of the most prominent funders of grandiose religious rituals have been business or middle class elements who have benefited from the open economic policies in the post- 1977 period. On the other hand, the expensive items offered as alms (eg., apples and Sustagen) are also products of these same economic policies. In a sense grandiose religiosity has resulted from the consumerism ushered in by open economic policies seeping into religious life. In fact many of the businessmen who regularly take part in grandiose religious activities believed that such participation would guarantee the success of their businesses. That is, such grandscale activities provided some relief for their own sense of insecurity.

On the other hand there is a clear correlation between economic success and anticipated spiritual success through grandiose religiosity. That is, many organizers as well as participants seem to believe that the scale of the ritual or the expense of the items offered as alms is indicative of the scale of spiritual success — the more grandiose or expensive the more merit one can acquire. Thus it is hardly surprising that many of the sponsors or participants in grandiose religious activities believe that they can essentially "buy" their way to nirvana within this lifetime in the same manner they realized economic success. In essence, nirvana and one-way passage to heaven have become commodities that can be purchased by people who have access to money. In other words, nirvana and heavenly ascent have been redefined within a consumerist paradigm with the possibility of "instant" realization.

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11

Expectations of Peace, LTTE's Politics of Violence and the Silence of Tamil Intellectuals

The Introduction: The Sound of Silence:

In a sense this is not a coherent essay. It cannot be since my thoughts on the issues I want to address are not quite coherent at the moment. What follows are merely some observations, which I believe need to be addressed, and addressed now. My basic concern is the relative silence of Tamil intellectuals based in Sri Lanka (or elsewhere) regarding the violent politics of the LTTE in the context of the peace process initiated by the new government. More particularly however, I am referring to the manner in which these individuals look, or do not look at violence within Tamil society, particularly involving the LTTE. Such endeavors, to be of any real practical use have to be undertaken by members of the Tamil society themselves, particularly by those who have access to different shades of public opinion among Tamils in the North and East.

I initially thought about writing an essay addressing these issues months ago, when it appeared that irrespective of their abilities and access to the print and electronic media many of the colleagues and friends I asked to undertake such a venture simply did not come through. While agreeing with me on the necessity of such regular public interventions, many also found perfectly impenetrable middle class ramparts to hide behind. My own project did not proceed beyond this idea, and a few lines in a slim folder lost within the impersonal memory of a computer. The hesitance on my part was due to certain polemical interpretations some people were likely to arrive at given the nature of the socio-cultural identities that I am burdened with, and the content of the subject matter I wanted to address.

As far as I am concerned, my Sinhalaness or Buddhistness is not a problem. The problem is that within the parochial limitations of the nationalist discourse of both Tamils and Sinhalas, constructive dissent or criticism is usually not tolerated — particularly by sections of the middle class with access to the national press. Part of the problem is that I do not have the time to respond to these kinds of polemical comments. However, such a situation of self-censorship cannot endure, and should not. Within the parameters of these limitations, a critical look at Sinhala society would make me a traitor among some Sinhalas. A critical look at the Tamil society would make me a racist among some Tamils but a darling among ultra nationalist sections of Sinhalas. In both cases my observations would be taken out of context. The former label has already been used to describe me, but not the latter. This probably would be the beginning of that latter process as well. .

I must confess however, that I received much needed motivation to complete this essay after I read Rajan Hoole's recent intervention in the *Sunday Times* of 6th November 1994. That was the kind of intervention I had in mind. That is the kind of intervention I hope to see more often in the future. But these interventions have to go beyond the English language print media to reach the wider Sinhala society. Like average Tamils it would be average Sinhalas who would truly benefit from peace. It is their sons who die in combat; it is their relatives who are murdered by the LTTE; they are the people who have lost their land and property; they are the people who have become refugees. Thus they have to be shown — by people who know — that there is a distinct difference between the agenda of the LTTE and the aspirations of Tamil people.

The Nature of the Space for Peace Among Sinhalas:

As most of us are quite aware, there has been for some time a tendency among many Sinhalas to make no conceptual difference between LTTE activists and ordinary Tamils. They are all lumped together as *koti,* or tigers. Such a situation has come about as a result of a decade old war during which regular contact between the Tamil and Sinhala societies remained marginal and suspect. During that time most public debates on nationalism, ethnicity and religion tended to be rather parochial and polemical leading to the institutionalization of overtly chauvinist attitudes on both sides. However, at the moment there is a small political space within which an attempt for a genuine peace may be initiated. On the part of the People's Alliance government there is also much needed political will to build on this foundation. How long that political will would last however remains to be seen.

The desire for peace among the Sinhalas has not come overnight, and it is certainly not the political achievement of any political party. On one hand, part of that space has been carved out by a small group of Sinhala intellectuals over a long period of time. For their efforts they

have been castigated as traitors and demonized by sections of the Sinhala society motivated by rather parochially defined nationalist currents. On the other hand, and more importantly, the real and sometimes tragic experiences of ordinary people have also contributed immensely to the emergence of this space. They were tired of losing their loved ones and relatives in the war. They were also wary of seeing no end to the military process that was rapidly losing its momentum as a glorious nationalist project. The experience of suffering at the hands of the JVP and the State in the late 1980s also have made many Sinhalas more sympathetic and sensitive to the problems and the suffering of Tamils — certainly more so than in the early 1980s.

But none of these relatively positive developments moulded by experiences of pain and bloodshed should be taken for granted or placed out of context. One must remember that there is also ample space to make avoidable mistakes, and destroy the slim avenues for peace that remain open. The emergence of a small but viable political space for peace is not the same thing as the eradication of institutionalized racism. To achieve the latter goal, even to a reasonable extent would take much more time — perhaps another generation with careful planning. Decades of ethnic politics and misunderstanding is unlikely to vanish after two elections. It would be a mistake to assume so, and quite naive to characterize President Kumaratunge's recent massive electoral victory as a rejection of racism *per se*. There were many more complex variables that motivated people to vote the way they did. To reduce such complexities to a simple variable is sociologically unviable. All we have at the moment is simply a small political space within which peace may be legitimized. But such a space is also a fragile space that can be lost if we are not cautious. Let me give one recent example of a situation in which that small space was nearly destroyed.

Consider the new government's rather naive and amateurish handling of the public relations exercise consequent to the assassination of Gamini Dissanayake and fifty or so others. While there was no physical evidence to link the bombing that killed Dissanayake and others to the LTTE, the modus operandi and lessons from the past pointed towards the LTTE as the most likely culprit. Immediately after the explosion, sections of the Sinhala society argued who the killers were, and came up with a list of possible culprits: the LTTE, Sirisena Cooray, Ranil Wickramasinghe, the new government in association with the LTTE. The government's propaganda apparatus — most clearly the Rupavahini — kept on repeating an alleged LTTE denial of the bombing long before the LTTE itself officially made such a statement. In any case, since when do people seriously take the word of the LTTE for what it

is? As we know, so far the LTTE has only acknowledged responsibility for attacks on military and some government infrastructural targets. They have never taken the responsibility for attacks on civilian targets. In this particular instance the government looked as if it had suddenly become apologists for the LTTE. It sounded and seemed far more enthusiastic propagandists for the LTTE than Anton Balasingham himself.

Interestingly however, among the Tamils (i.e shop keepers, office workers etc. and not the pundit types) in Colombo whom I spoke to, there was no confusion as to who was responsible for the assassination of Dissanayake. Most were convinced that the LTTE was the culprit. Similarly, as Hoole points out in his article there was also no confusion in Jaffna. Not only did the people in Jaffna know that the LTTE was responsible, they also knew why. Moreover, they were also very angry since many perceived that the self-declared protectors of the Tamil people had destroyed (at least in the short run) the best chance for peace which had come their way in more than a decade.

Accepting the most likely LTTE complicity in the assassination would not have discredited the government. Nor should it have derailed the peace process. There is no reason, except in naive political discourse why these two processes should be linked. After all, the destructive actions of the LTTE should not dictate the political initiatives from the South. Moreover, the government's frankness (which did not come through) and the continuation of negotiations with the LTTE would have made the government even more popular among the people in the North and East. Equally as importantly, such a matter of fact approach would have prevented most of the negative criticisms that were levelled at the government. The government also could have explained to the people in the South without much persuasion that these kinds of incidents are likely to happen when one has to deal with a Fascist group like the LTTE. The ground reality is that much of the Northern Province and parts of the Eastern Province are under direct or indirect military and administrative control of the LTTE. As such, irrespective of its actions it would be necessary to negotiate with the LTTE — at least in the short run.

I would suggest that why this fiasco did not backfire on the government in the presidential election was more due to the complexity of voter expectations and behaviour rather than the sudden rejection of institutionalized racism. But the government came very close to destroying this fragile space for peace due to its mishandling of the incident described above.

Expectations of Peace and the LTTE's Political Agenda:

Peace does not come with mere euphoria and the expectations of the Sinhala and Tamil people, or the initiatives of the government. As we have already noted the LTTE also plays a key role. However, considering the history of the LTTE and its present actions, it would be naive to expect that the LTTE would help initiate and sustain the kind of peace most people want. It does not appear to me that peace is part of the LTTE's immediate political agenda. Within the frame of reference of the current LTTE leadership's thinking, a relatively free democratic system of provincial government is not the ideal set up. The reason is that if such a system is allowed to operate, the LTTE may actually lose the political and military power it currently enjoys. That power has primarily been consolidated by subverting democratic practices and stifling dissent within Tamil society itself. After all, the great majority of inmates in LTTE's clandestine prisons are Tamils themselves. In other words, Prabhakaran would not like to lose the "supremo" status he currently enjoys. What this translates into is, that while the current LTTE leadership is still intact, the prospects for any lasting peace is not particularly good irrespective of what the Tamil and Sinhala people or the government want.

The LTTE will only change with internal criticism and dissent within Tamil society itself. Such criticism can only come if Tamil people in general believe that the LTTE is an obstacle to peace. As Mao Tse Tung once remarked "guerillas are fish swimming in a pond of public sympathy." In fact, they are fish swimming in a pond of collective fear as well. But ponds of public sympathy and collective fear can be drained. It would appear that it was precisely due to the LTTE's fear of such an outcome in the context of the PA government's peace initiatives and the popular support for those initiatives in the Tamil society that the LTTE decided to sabotage the peace process through the Dissanayake assassination. According to some sections of Tamil opinion, with the assassination of Dissanayake the LTTE managed to remove a potential future threat to its existence as well as force the government itself to postpone the peace talks. However, if the politics of the LTTE is the only serious obstacle to peace, that obstacle needs to be overcome.

Such an endeavour is primarily an intellectual project, and not a military one. This is where Tamil intellectuals have a significant role to play. Moreover, the peace talks initiated by the government should go on irrespective of short-term failures resulting from LTTE tactics. That would be one way to establish the state's willingness to achieve peace, and also establish the LTTE's unwillingness to achieve the same goal.

The Role of Tamil Intellectuals:

The government has already demonstrated that it is incapable of tackling certain explosive situations. One reason for that is perhaps its relative lack of experience in governing. However, I have no doubt about the sincerity of at least some of its leaders in attempting to find a lasting solution to the ethnic conflict, or more likely to the military conflict that it has given rise to. So there is no harm in being hopeful and extending whatever help possible to them. Having said that, I would also suggest that it would be utterly dangerous to restrict politics of peace to a group of politicians with varying degrees of experience and their dubious advisers and to the murderers and apologists of the LTTE.

In addition to the talks between these two groups which necessarily should take place, intellectuals and other interested persons from the North and South should also initiate various processes specifically for the long term exchange of information and ideas that would help the peace process. For instance, contacts have to be made with academics, teachers, non-LTTE politicians and ordinary citizens in the North-East without LTTE interference and censorship. We need to be informed about what is going on in areas most of us do not have direct access to. Such long-term processes have to continue irrespective of the success or failure of the politics of the state and the LTTE. Therefore I would urge my colleagues in the North and East and the South to make an initiative in this regard.

It is as part of such a long-term project that there is a need for public interventions to explain — among other things — the obvious differences between the agenda of the LTTE and the aspirations and problems of ordinary people in Jaffna and elsewhere. Precisely due to lack of such interventions, many Sinhalas perceive Tamil political opinion and activity as synonymous with the thinking and actions of the LTTE. However, I believe that to have any real legitimacy such interventions should ideally come from members of the Tamil community. They may be teachers, academics, professionals, and farmers. They may be living in Jaffna, Colombo or members of the diaspora. In short, these interventions have to come from people who have experienced what they are talking about and studied what they are talking about.

However, critical evaluations about serious problems and divisions in one's own society may not be easy. But it has to be done. To a reasonable extent this has occurred in the Sinhala society. I would suggest that the critical evaluation of the Sinhala past and identity undertaken by some Sinhala social scientists in the late 1970s was the initial phase of this continuing process. If some of the literature of the Tamil diaspora is any indication such a process has also occurred in Tamil society to a limited extent — that is, Tamil societies in Boston, Melbourne, London, but certainly not in Jaffna or elsewhere in Sri Lanka.

There are clear reasons why this is so. Silence in Jaffna is a legacy of LTTE terror and politics. Its critics have disappeared or languish in unknown prisons. Many others in the North claim that they "open their mouths only to eat and clean their teeth." The LTTE is not exactly the ideal protector of the freedom of expression or the democratic rights of the people it claims to rule over. It is more likely a protector of its own "democratic" rights. But in the North the silence is not indicative of a defeated people. It is also a weapon of the weak. People still continue to think and talk even though those thoughts and words may not manifest in writing for a considerable time. The collective muttering of a multitude of people who were frustrated after the postponement of the peace talks between the government and the LTTE consequent to the assassination of Dissanayake was symbolic of dissent.

Among some Tamils in the South, this silence and lack of evaluation of the politics of the LTTE is a legacy of misguided patriotism or misplaced priorities. On the other hand many feel truly threatened by the violent politics of the LTTE. For many, public interventions could also mean getting used to a shadowy underground existence. Leaving the LTTE-controlled areas would not guarantee their safety. For Tamil politicians linked to the current peace process it could also mean being placed on an LTTE hit list and being surrounded by armed body guards on a routine basis. Clearly, the Sinhala intellectuals who initiated the critical evaluation of the Sinhala past, identity and politics never had to face such a violent political force as the LTTE.

One argument that has been put forward to explain this relative silence is somewhat as follows. Sustained and concerted public interventions by Tamil intellectuals critiquing the LTTE — among other things — can only begin after the peace process has gathered some momentum, and after a semblance of peace has been restored to the war-torn Northern and Eastern Provinces. I would suggest exactly the opposite. Peace can only be restored consequent to the deconstruction

of the most polemical strands of Tamil myth-making and nationalist politics as well as by critiquing the violent politics of the LTTE. The dangers involved in such an endeavour are obvious. However, one cannot simply await the arrival of peace without constructing the most important foundation for that peace.

Whatever the restrictions to the free flow of information may be, that situation cannot continue if the overall peace process has to win any real legitimacy in the South. Without such legitimacy the long-term establishment of peace may not be possible. That is why the reality of the experiences of Tamil people have to be documented and presented to the people in the South. That, I believe is the most important intellectual project that should be initiated by Sri Lankan — particularly Tamil — intellectuals before the end of this century. Such a project I believe is an essential prerequisite for initiating and sustaining a lasting peace. We should perhaps note that the Social Scientists' Association's recent publication of the Sinhala version of the *Broken Palmyra*, which details some experiences of the Tamils of Jaffna in the 1980s has become popular reading material among many sections of Sinhala society. The book is particularly popular among undergraduates, students, monks and even military personnel. Clearly, there is an interest among sections of the Sinhala reading public for such information.

But their understanding of the conflict and the reality of the North and East have to be regularly upgraded. The following are some of the questions that can be posed to which answers in the form of interventions may be provided: What is the nature of the LTTE's cult leadership, why is the LTTE fascinated with glorified violence, how does its administration run, what is the nature of its politics in general, how does it treat its critics, what is the nature of its concept of justice, what are the opinions of different sections of the Tamil society about the LTTE, what are the avenues for peace ordinary Tamils suggest, if peace returns to the North and East would the people like to be ruled by an LTTE dominated provincial regime, do the bulk of the people closely identify themselves with the LTTE, has the LTTE's continuing violent activities despite the government peace initiatives initiated a process of delegitimizing them in the eyes of the Tamil people, is there adequate space for such a delegitimization, how do people view the politics of the South, how do people define and deal with state-sponsored military excesses, how do average Tamils view Sinhalas. The list of such questions would be endless. It would be endless because such questions have not been regularly posed and answered.

There are already some Sinhala newspapers that publish such interventions when available. The question now is not so much a problem with space in the print media, but a lack of interventions. A colleague suggested recently that it would be unfair and unreasonable to expect such interventions from Jaffna given the LTTE's iron rule and the fear psychosis it has inculcated. However, history has amply demonstrated that underground literature has been smuggled out of much more problematic areas and that such literature has made a difference in many situations of apparent hopelessness. The reality is that we need such informed information in situations such as these. It is up to the Tamil intellectuals to gather this information from all possible sources. For one, I would be willing to translate these — at least from English to Sinhala — and prepare them for publication.

What we have to keep in mind is, that in the end any failure in the peace process cannot be merely labeled as the work of Sinhala chauvinists, Tamil chauvinists, or the LTTE. Such a failure would also be the result of the silence of Tamil intellectuals.

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Notes

1 An earlier version of this essay was originally published in *Pravada* Volume 3, No. 1 (January - February 1994). Colombo: Social Scientists' Association. It also appeared in the Sunday Times, 13 March 1994. Colombo: Wijeya Newspapers Ltd.

2 JVP in Sinhala stand for the Janata Vimukti Peramuna or the Peoples' Liberation Front.

3 Plastic bags commonly found in Sri Lanka which are used to pack chemical fertilizers.

4 "Duro" is a local trade name.

5 An earlier version of this essay was originally published in P*ravada* Volume 3, No. 3 (April - May 1994). Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.

6 This essay was originally published in *Pravada* Volume 3, No. 4 (June - July 1994). Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.

7 The Sinhala word "jatiya" commonly refers to ethnicity, race, citizenship, nationality and also carries various connotations of caste.

8 Emphasis added.

9 Sumanapala is not his real name.

10 Approximate translation.

11 Emphasis and explanations within parenthesis added.

12 Similar extremist ideas can be found among Tamils as well. But I shall not focus on these manifestations in this essay.

13 A Pradeshiya Sabha is a local government administrative unit.

14 Approximate translation. The sign also stated that Wariyapola was the birth place of Rev. Wariyapola Sri Sumangala Thera who is credited with bringing down the Union Jack and hoisting the Lion flag on 2nd March 1815 when the British took control of Sri Lanka under the provisions of the Kandyan Convention.

15 The number of lotuses were calculated as a million by one estimate, and thousands and a hundred thousand by others. What is important is not the exact number of flowers but the fact that a large number was clearly involved.

Sasanka Perera is an anthropologist and senior lecturer at the Department of Sociology, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka. He obtained his BA degree from the University of Colombo in 1985. In 1989 he received his MA and C. Phil degrees in Anthropology from the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA. In 1991 he received his Ph. D Degree in Anthropology from the same University. He conducted post-doctoral research at Princeton University, New Jersey until 1992.

His research interests include the role of education in plural societies, ethnicity and ethnic conflict, nationalism, political violence and the transformation and politicization of religions.