ICES Ethnicity Course Lecture Series 1

# Buddhism, Nationhood and Cultural Identity : The Premodern and Pre-Colonial Formations

Lecture delivered by
**Gananath Obeyesekere**

at the
**Course on Ethnicity, Identity and Conflict**
ICES Auditorium, Colombo
August 9, 2002

International Centre for Ethnic Studies
Colombo

# Buddhism, Nationhood and Cultural Identity: The Premodern and Pre-Colonial Formations

**Gananath Obeyesekere** is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Princeton University

January.2004

International Centre for Ethnic Studies
2, Kynsey Terrace
Colombo 8
Sri Lanka

# Buddhism, Nationhood and Cultural Identity: The Premodern and Pre-Colonial Formations

Lecture delivered by
**Gananath Obeyesekere**
*at the*
***Course on Ethnicity, Identity and Conflict***
*ICES Auditorium, Colombo*
*August 9, 2002*

International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo

## Acknowledgements

The International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) was established in August 1982 with two offices in Colombo and Kandy. To celebrate it's twentieth anniversary in August 2002, the ICES introduced a 25 day study course on **Ethnicity, Identity and Conflict** bringing together Sri Lankan scholars living abroad and those in Sri Lanka as the faculty members.

The ICES is deeply grateful to the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) for the financial support towards this project.

# Buddhism, Nationhood and Cultural Identity: The Premodern and Pre-Colonial Formations[1]

## Part One

## Nationalist Discourses and the Nation State

In this paper I want to question a fundamental assumption of contemporary political discourse in both the academy and outside, namely, the almost axiomatic contention that "nationalism" is something that originated in the West. In this originary sense it had a "modular" impact, as Benedict Anderson puts it, on virtually every nation under the sun. Even those South Asian theorists critical of Anderson cannot get away from this assumptive trap. Thus, for Partha Chatterjee, Indian nationalism is a "derivative discourse," even though that phrase is put in question marks.[2] By contrast, Peter van der Veer realizes as I do the importance of pre-modern formations in national consciousness, though he rightly points out the significance of the history of colonialism and the Hindu-Muslim reactions to it as central to modern manifestations of "religious nationalism."[3] The conventional definition of the emergence of the nation state and nationalism is to me unsatisfactory because it, by definition, rules out forms of life that might exhibit family resemblances to modern European nationalism. It may well be that such forms of life may throw light on the appearance of nationalism on the global scene, including its arrival in Europe, and most importantly help us to qualify the modular significance of nationalism.

I am not sure that the discourses on "nationalism" are coterminous with the ideology of the nation state. Because the word "nationalism" is derived from "nation," it is not etymologically indefensible to state that "nationalism" could exist where the idea

of nation exists; it need not be intrinsically associated with the "nation state" as it developed in modern times. Thus, it makes sense for Helgerson to write about "forms of nationhood" in Elizabethan England; and it seems to me that the sentiments and impetus underlying the construction of forms of nationhood could reasonably be described as "nationalism."[4] To complicate matters there are multiple discourses and practices subsumed under "nationalism" even in our own times, whereas the "nation state" can be better defined. There are only few public or populist discourses about the nation state; hence that idea could be reserved for theorizing by social scientists. By contrast, discourses on "nationalism" are everywhere and shares the same fate as terms like "fundamentalism," "racism," "anti-Semitism," "ethnicity" and "patriotism," such that in public discourse it is hard to draw the line between them, though Anderson and others have attempted to do so. To complicate matters the term nationalism can also be a demonizing label as is its relative "fundamentalism" whereas its sister term "patriotism" escapes this ignominy. In the print media, as far as my desultory reading of the New York Times suggests, nationalism, like fundamentalism, is converted into a discourse about the practices and ideologies of the Other. To give definitional specificity to something so elusive, contradictory and multi-vocal as nationalism is to ignore that very multi-vocal character. To put it differently: the rational discourse of nationalism, as it is practiced by students of modern nation states, is one type of discourse among a larger variety on the same subject.

Benedict Anderson in his important and innovative work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* himself recognizes some of these problems when he says that nationalism, nation and nationality are "notoriously difficult to define" in contrast to the immense influence that elusive entity has exerted on the modern world.[5] He admits that the different discourses on nationalism are "cultural artifacts" of a particular kind; consequently, the question of how they came into "historical being" is relevant.[6] This emergence of multiple discourses occurred towards the end of the 18th century: "once



created, they become 'modular,' capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains."[7] This illusive phenomenon of nation as he states in his famous phrase "is an imagined community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[8] Anderson is too intelligent not to recognize that virtually all communities are imagined; hence what is important is the style in which modern nationalism is imagined in contrast to the "concrete communities" of the past.[9]

I for one believe that the marvelous phrase "imagined communities" has seduced us to such a degree that we all feel compelled to use it and implicitly accept much of Anderson's flawed arguments. Anderson then spells out what he means by "limited" and "sovereign;" the first refers to fixity of borders while the latter was born out of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution that in turn was instrumental in destroying earlier ideas of the divine right of kings. Further, in his thinking, nationalism affects consciousness by producing a "deep horizontal comradeship" among citizens, something not possible to imagine prior to the invention of the nation state. Nationalism stands in sharp contrast to the kind of solidarity fostered in the traditional religious community "linked by sacral languages;"[10] or the "dynastic state" which is wholly antipathetic to the spirit of modern nations because "in the modern conception state sovereignty is fully, flatly and evenly operative over each square centimeter of a legally demarcated territory."[11] What then brought the new imagined community into being?

Now Anderson can get to the core of his argument. It is "print capitalism," manifested most clearly in the novel and the newspaper that "provided the technical means of 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation."[12] "An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000 odd fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity."[13] Why so? "Community in anonymity ... is the hallmark of modern

nations."[14] He sums up the core of his thesis in the following terms: "I have been arguing that the very possibility of imagining the nation only arose historically when, and where, three fundamental cultural conceptions, all of great antiquity, lost their axiomatic grip on men's minds. The first ... script language offered privileged access to ontological truth. It was this idea that called into being the great transcontinental sodalities of Christendom, the Ummah Islam *and the rest.* [Second] [M]onarchs who were persons apart from other human beings and who ruled by some form of cosmological (divine) dispensation. ... Third was a conception of temporality in which cosmology and history were indistinguishable.... "[15] All this may be true of the Western past; the lumping must be reexamined, as must be the relation between cosmology and divine kingship and history. Because the emergence of the historical being we call nationalism was primarily related to the rise of print capitalism, one must question the centrality of this notion on empirical and theoretical grounds.

First let me deal with the crucial notion of print capitalism as a theoretical term. For Anderson print capitalism was significant very early in the West because "fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular invisibility, the embryo of a nationally imagined community."[16] Much later he says: "Print language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se."[17] Thus print capitalism produces an impersonal and anonymous solidarity, yet a solidarity nevertheless that constitutes a "deep, horizontal comradeship" where, for example Americans, in spite of the absence of face to face contact with their fellow citizens can relate to them in that anonymity with "complete confidence." Nevertheless, there is something in Anderson's theory that is not readily apparent — an implicit ideological position regarding the nature of modern (and post-modern society), namely, our own contemporary alienation and a celebration of our modern/postmodern condition with its fragmented identities. These fragments, he suggests, following Benjamin, cannot be put back to reconstitute the broken jar — the



unbroken jar perhaps is a metaphor for a pre-modern condition. Though fragmented, the modern identity produces a mystical communion with others in similar fragmented states and that is what I take the deep horizontal comradeship to mean. Thus, it seems to me, that Anderson reifies into theory a modernist, even post-modernist, ideological stance. The problem with this stance is that like previous scientistic sociological theories, Anderson also has to assume a radical break between the pre-modern and the post, even though he does not use crude categories like tradition and modernity. Having adopted this position it is now possible for me to make more detailed criticisms of Anderson.

Take the case of the cenotaphs that Anderson thinks epitomizes the national (read modern) condition. Cenotaphs are generally for the "unknown warrior;" yet it is an aspect of modern nationhood that people get emotionally wrought over as they gather to celebrate the unknown dead in yearly ceremonies. But is Anderson correct? Who on earth remembers with passion, or for that matter without passion, those anonymous persons who died in World War I? The effect cenotaphs have on us is not due to the impersonality of monuments per se but rather to the parades and presences of *living* veterans and symbols that give an immediacy and vividness to the recollection of those who died. The phenomenal success of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. is not because of its anonymous nature but the very opposite — the visible identities of the dead inscribed into cold marble, such that people and loved ones can touch a dead person's name, place a flower or a wreath and revive memories of the past. And those of us who haven't suffered a personal loss can, in being a witness to the loss of others, empathically feel for the spiritual presence of those who died prematurely. The deep comradeship that Anderson talks about is not a product of the impersonality of modern society but the result of a feature that modern society shares with various forms of the pre-modern, namely, its personalistic nature. This personalism is manifest in symbolic forms perpetuated by those very instrumentalities in modern society that Anderson thinks expresses

the impersonal ethic of our times. The modern nation is represented symbolically in such personages as presidents and other notables along with national heroes of sports and those who, like film personalities, are able to personalize our collective fantasies. They represent the nation or some aspect of the collective consciousness and, though they seem very modern, they have their isomorphic parallels in pre-modern cultures. We personalize them, gossip about them and idealize them; we are obsessed by their private lives that nurture our own fantasies. National heroes are not abstract beings at all. The ceremonials that are associated with the public lives and activities of such beings as modern constitutional monarchs and the more modern presidents and prime ministers share features with those dynasties that Anderson thinks disappeared with print capitalism. These features are not extrinsic to the modern state but intrinsic to its continuity and existence.

This is not the only level in which the state is personalized. It can be passionately personalized in collective representations like football games and sports activities of various sorts where our team is opposed to theirs. One can argue that it is not so much the idealization of impersonality that is at the heart of the nation state but the attempt to imagine a sense of personalized communal consciousness and of belongingness in a situation where face-to-face contact is impossible. But then it seems to me that the absence of face-to-face contact among those who do not share kin ties is a feature of virtually all societies larger than a village or village cluster even in various pre-modern polities. And one must not forget that while modern societies do not have extended kin groups such as clans and lineages they do have clubs and corporations, lodges and periodic gatherings (such as that of high school and college alumni) that indeed permit face-to-face recognition.

Given Anderson's emphasis on print capitalism as the forerunner and instigator of the nation, one must ask whether the thesis is empirically supportable. It may well be that Luther's works sold phenomenally well in Germany and Anderson may be right that Protestantism fostered print capitalism to an unprecedented degree. But whether this indicated a mass readership in every European nation has yet to be demonstrated.[18]. The number of



editions sold is no indication of an avid horizontal reading public. The habit of reading so necessary to the development of a print mentality can obviously occur when there is a mass literate reading public and it is doubtful whether such a public existed before the late 19th century anywhere in Europe. It is true that England, the most literate of European nations, had a high rate of literacy in the 1700s with one third of the adult population being literate, but one must question whether that had any direct bearing to mass readership. Moreover, print capitalism as we know it today was quite different in the 18th and early 19th centuries in England. What sold were selected books that had an appeal to a large public, such as the Almanacs and the new edition of Fox's *Book of Martyrs*, according to Linda Colley.[19] And these were popular because they extolled the Protestant heritage and held up Catholics as the hated Other, both as treasonous beings in their own society and as enemies outside, the enemy in this case being concretized as the French. Colley shows very neatly that the cement that held Britain together was in fact a deep ("primordial") sentiment of religion, something that Anderson and other theorists think is a phenomenon of pre-nationalist states.[20]

The situation is only worse in the very place that the nation state, if not nationalism, was invented. Thus, while it is true that in the 17th century, Corneille, Moliere and La Fontaine could sell their manuscripts to publishers directly, their circulation was restricted to Paris for the most part, and to French speaking urban centers in a situation where French was virtually unknown in many of the provinces until the end of the 18th century, according to Eugen Weber.[21] Reading was an exclusive urban habit for most of the 19th century, and, contrary to Anderson, novels were hardly read anywhere outside urban centers. Consider the situation as far as newspapers were concerned, the true index of print mentality! In 1879 newspapers were a mere trickle in most provinces in France. The change came about only in the 20th century when the habit of reading newspapers spread rapidly (though the existence of national and provincial newspapers and a reading public developed much earlier in England). Newspaper

reading may be a true index of a modern consciousness but by that token French peasants did not become modern till the 20th century. Print capitalism is crucial for the perpetuation of nationalism in the 20th century because neither nationalism nor the nation-state is a finished product but a process that is always in the making and remaking.

Eugen Weber in his finely detailed study of the slow progress of French nationhood has a devastating implicit criticism of Anderson. Weber's argument can be summed up as follows. It is indeed the case that the French revolution created the concept of the nation state but this idea could not be realized in practical reality in a country that did not, till the late 19th century, recognize for the most part any notion of French-ness. "If ... being French is not a mere abstract acknowledgement, but rather a consciousness and an everyday experience, then these people who lived in the middle of France in 1860 were scarcely French."[22] One's country or *pays* was the parish or village. "That is why ... most Frenchmen for a long time did not think to describe France as their pays — until what they were taught came to coincide with experience."[23] Few spoke the language even though the administration of the provinces was conducted in French. This meant that, while France had an ideal conception of nationhood, it was in reality a state, not a nation in the sense of a "moral community" possessing a sense of collective identity. The key date for Weber is 1880; it was the beginning of effective centralization through schools, the construction of roads, military service and the imposition of the French language.[24] Patois or local languages were forbidden in most schools and by World War I only pockets of patois remained. All this was heralded by bureaucratic centralization, the key element in the transformation of the state into a nation and then into the nation-state. The process itself constituted a form of violent "internal colonization" that expunged local cultures of their uniqueness.[25] The end product, manifest most clearly after 1914 (World War 1) is a "unity of mind and feeling, implicit or explicit" because "the nation, in the last resort and the most fundamental,



is a cultural unit."[26] France took time to become a "patrie," a fatherland. "The concept of the patrie, land of one's fathers can mediate between private society (the family) and official society (the nation)."[27]

Now we can come back to Anderson: his discussion of the transformation of pre-modern states (the "rest") into modern nations is especially weak. According to him the Japanese nation had no significant continuity with the pre-modern dynastic formations; at best there were subsidiary conditions that affected the development of the nation. It is hard to believe that Japan simply took over in 1889 "a Prussian style constitution and eventual universal male suffrage."[28] The features that he thinks are subsidiary ("acted by") surely could have been primary, especially cultural homogeneity, the presence of a literate language that transcended local boundaries and the felt perception of the antiquity of the Imperial House. What is to say that these features were not central to the formation of the modern Japanese national identity that developed later? Even the label given to this kind of polity is misleading: "official nationalism" or the nationalism imposed from above by a powerful ruling class. A label like "official nationalism" implies that there were unofficial ones whereas it is difficult for me to imagine a form of nationalism, in Anderson's sense, that is not official. In Weber's account, French nationalism was very much official, a product imposed from above by the French state dominated by its ruling classes.

The Thai ruling class also gets short shrift in Anderson's analysis. Theirs is an "anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups who are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community."[29] In other words the nation would have emerged anyway but the elites fostered that development in terms of their own self-interest. Equally denigrating and myopic is his understanding of King Vajiravudh's slogan, "Nation, Religion, Monarch" (Chat, Sasana, Kasat). Anderson thinks that the inspiration for the King's attempt to create nationhood was England and the Netherlands; whereas I think that while these terms were re-invented under the threat of colonialism,

they had their family resemblances in Thailand's past and that past, in conjunction with European models, constituted Vajiravudh's remaking of nationhood. I take the very opposite position from Anderson's and argue that what was subsidiary or superficial is the imitation of Western state models and that the powerful and enduring bases for the construction of a modern nation state rested on pre-modern ideological foundations. "It goes without saying that Wachirawut (sic) also began moving all policy levers of official nationalism; compulsory state-controlled primary education, state organized propaganda, official rewriting of history, militarism ... and endless affirmations of the identity of dynasty and nation".[30] Virtually everything Anderson lists here, except perhaps state organized propaganda and state schools that supplemented monastic ones have their ideological precursors in the Thai Buddhist polity.

What Anderson fails to recognize is that the traditional Buddhist polities had their own conceptions that closely paralleled the modular "nationhood" that Anderson postulates for the West and this facilitated the take over of Western models. Given his assumption, Anderson can easily wipe out the significance of the past in the creation of modern nationalism. Consequently he can make absurd statements, such as the following: "The rise of (modern, organized) Burmese nationalism is often dated to the founding in 1908 of the Young Men's Buddhist Association in Rangoon."[31] The give away words are in brackets, "modern" and "organized"; obviously the pre-modern Burmese polity could not be "modern." Consequently it is fallacious to say that the Burmese, Japanese or Thai had developed a modern conception of nationhood or nationalism in pre-colonial times; by definition they could not have done so. No nation under the sun could possibly have developed a modern nation in pre-modern times, if we use the language games of theorists of nationalism. Given these definitional presuppositions, the concepts that defined the modern state *had* to be "modular," in particular centralized bureaucratic control of governance. In my view it is not the idea of nation that the rest learned from the West. Rather the very opposite, namely the idea of the State, in the modern sense of a centralized



government extending legal sway over a multitude of local groups. Many pre-modern polities already had conceptions that paralleled the idea of a "nation."

Anderson's naiveté regarding pre-colonial polities affects almost everything he says about non-western nations. He poses a non-problem when he says that the sense of being an Indo-Chinese ("Indo-Chineseness") did not last long while "Indonesian-ness survived and deepened."[32] The comparison is totally misplaced: Indo-Chineseness was a conception introduced by the French, something imposed from the outside by an alien power. It had to break up precisely because of the power of previous formations, that is, the Buddhist "national" identities that were operative in pre-colonial times and were now used by the leaders of the independence movements to create modern nation states in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The attempt to weld these multiple groups into one was doomed to fail. The success of Indonesian-ness through a common official language is also problematic. I cannot share Anderson's optimism: "By 1928, shaped by two generations of urban writers and readers, it was ready to be adopted by Young Indonesians as the national language, *bahasa Indonesia.* Since then, it has never looked back."[33] We do not know how successful this attempt has been in creating a sense of Indonesian-ness that transcends other identities like Balinese and Javanese and Meningkabau because there is no free forum for these latter groups to affirm their independence and autonomy. One can argue that if the Javanese dominated army did not exist, and local leaders were permitted to surface, Indonesia might well split into independent kingdoms on the bases of pre-colonial communal identities, as was the case with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Indonesian-ness might indeed succeed, as French-ness succeeded, by bringing recalcitrant local groups under the duress of internal colonization.

My final critique: Anderson like many other theorists of nationalism is a victim of his own definitions. Once you define nationalism as a product of the West modularly exported to the rest, then you have by definition excluded other forms of

"nationalism" and have eliminated their significance for the emergence of nation states outside of the West. But if one makes the argument that there are many "forms of nationhood" in pre-modern polities, then one can say that there also could be "forms of nationalism" that were associated with them. Anderson's discussion of patriotism and racism falls into the same trap. In his idealized concept of modernity, one might even say in his mystical concept of it, there cannot be passion and fury. For him the element of hatred is "insignificant in ... expressions of national feeling;" nationalism possesses ties that have "a halo of disinterestedness."[34] This idea has been totally demolished by historians like Colley who point out the following features, and many more, in the constitution of nationalism of the nation state: the significance of scapegoatism and the hatred of the Other (Catholics and French); the need for warfare to keep the nationalist spirit going; the utility of foreign possessions in creating internal solidarity. By contrast, Anderson's mystical view of nationalism can only be sustained by treating related forms like patriotism and racism as either pathological eruptions or irrelevant to nationalism. Thus, such notions as the evil empire or the great Satan or the axis of evil are not expressions of nationalism but might be better classed as patriotism; and racism cannot be a part of nationalism either in, let us say, Nazi Germany. Nationalism's halo of disinterestedness is such that it remains uncontaminated by such forces. Surely this is again an artifact of a definition or of a set of assumptions? Racism, in Anderson's scheme of things, is a thing in itself. Like "nationalism" it can also be set apart and examined in relation to socio-economic variables like class. But this strategy, like the strategy of nationalism itself, is misleading because racism is not a single thing but a multiplicity of discourses that sometimes overlap with nationalism and sometimes do not. Thus the racism of the Nazis was integral to German nationalism of that period whereas in the remade Germany it is the very opposite. Racism is less significant for nationhood in the United States, but even here it is likely that white racists have a conception of the state that has as its imagined ideological base a notion of



racial purity and exclusiveness. To say that racism is a part of nationalism (Nairn) or class (Anderson) is purely arbitrary because it can be both these and more, depending on the nature of the racist discourses in question. Thus neither "nationalism" nor "racism" nor "patriotism" can be kept apart from each other; they flow into each other, and grasping this flow should be part of the interpretive or analytic task. The sociological strategy of keeping these separate would only work if the users of these discourses had employed definitions that were identical with that of the analysts. But since they do not, it is meaningless to force multiple and often contradictory discourses under the pre-given rubrics of the theorist.

To compound matters, not only the racists, patriots and nationalists have multiple and contradictory discourses, but the analysts also have the same under the guise of definitional differences that are the privilege of the scholar. And can the scholar claim immunity from the ideological currents that affect ordinary lives. We know that intellectuals in Nazi Germany used science and history to justify that particular brand of "racist nationalism" and who is there to say that more subtle ideological preconceptions do not affect the contemporary scholarly discourses on nationalism, outside of the easily recognizable political labels like "socialist" or "conservative" generally used to designate academic positions? Thus, as I said earlier, Anderson has a certain view of our modern condition, influenced I think by the mystical thinking of Benjamin. While I like Benjamin's diagnosis of our condition, I do find it troubling to see it surface in Anderson under the guise of "nationalism" because, unlike Benjamin, it is not recognized for what it is. As a statement on modernity, I find most of what Anderson says appealing; as a statement on nationalism I find most of it misleading and sometimes outright false.[35]

## Part Two

## Imagining a Buddhist "Whatever"

I will deliberately refrain from employing terms like "nation", "nation state" or even "state" to describe the situation from the 16th to the 19th centuries that includes the arrival of the Portuguese and the Dutch and their conquest of the coastal areas of the island until the crucial period of British colonialism when the independent kingdom of Kandy was conquered in 1815 and the whole island fell under imperial sway. For convenience sake I shall refer to this time as the "Kandyan period." For the moment I want to bracket the words from the Western lexicon listed above and tentatively substitute "whatever" instead, till I have presented the empirical material.

Whatever problems existed with "whatever," the idea of sovereignty was clearly recognized in Sri Lankan kingship from very ancient times. It was an ideological construct, a fiction, though a very significant one. Sovereignty was claimed for all of Sri Lanka, even by kings who had effective control over only a miniscule area (such as the Tamil kings of Jaffna after the 15th century). In reality the provinces could often assert their autonomy though they paid ideological homage to the "seat" of sovereignty that has always been a kind of "exemplary center." For most of ancient and medieval history the province of Ruhuna in the south was a virtually independent kingdom, an ideological replica of Anuradhapura (and later Polonnaruva) in the *rajarata*, "the royal province", so named because the seat of sovereignty was located there. In the Kandyan period — after the 16th century — Buddhist kingdoms became what Tambiah has called "galactic polities," a useful trope though misleading if literalized and seen outside of the context of colonial power. As far as Sri Lanka was concerned, kings had effective control over the provinces, especially through the frequent transfers or dismissals of provincial governors and the control of land resources.[36] Hence the characteristic of all



these Buddhist polities: structurally disparate, yet ideologically imagined as a unified Buddhist "whatever." For the most part the center was politically unstable: yet the ideology of a Buddhist "whatever" was fairly constant. Further, the kings still felt it their legitimate aspiration to aim at the unification of the whole island through conquest and their models were the very few sovereigns who effected that ideal in the practical polity — Dutthagamani (BCE 161-137), Vijayabahu 1 (CE 1070-1110), Parakarambahu 1 (CE 1153-1186) and the last king to unify the nation, Parakramabahu VI (CE 1412-1467).

Let me initially give some content to the "whatever" that I started with: it is some notion of ideological unity that transcends the fragmented and multiple notion of the "state." I will examine diverse kinds of popular texts to show how this ideological unity is conceived and expressed in the popular Buddhist imagination.

(1) To begin with I will focus on those texts found in the period under review that simply replicates or develops the founding of Sri Lanka first recorded in the classic history of the 6th century CE, The *Mahavamsa*. In these texts, the Buddha, flying through the air by virtue of his supernormal powers, landed in Sri Lanka three times, chasing demons to a distant isle known as giri dipa ("rocky isle" or "island city"), and settling a dispute among contending naga kings ("snake beings") living in the north and converting them. He visited places that later became sacred sites: Kalaniya near Colombo and Mahiyangana in the northeast where his collarbone relic (or neck bone) was later enshrined.[37] In his third visit he placed his foot on the top of the spectacular peak known as Samantakuta (Sumanakuta), named after the guardian of the peak, Sumana or Saman, later to become one of the guardian deities of Buddhist Sri Lanka. Some popular myths mention other places in the island where the Buddha visited or consecrated by planting his footprint. These myths of the Buddha's visits are uncontested. Their significance is equally clear: the island has been cleared of malevolent demons while the benevolent nagas are converted to the true religion. Major religious centers have

been sanctified by the Buddha's presence and his foot is indelibly inscribed on Samantakuta that consequently becomes the Sri Pada, "the mountain of the blessed footprint," the most important pilgrimage site for Buddhists. It is as if the land is consecrated as a place where Buddhism will flourish.[38] Further, the land is made ready for the coming of the founding ancestor of the Sinhalas, Vijaya.

(2) Vijaya ("victory") was the son of Sinhabahu, a parricidal king who killed his father, a lion, and then married his own sister, and lived in Sinhapura ("lion city") in northern India. Owing to his violent and unlawful behavior, Sinhabahu banished his son by putting him in a boat with seven hundred of his followers. Vijaya landed in Sri Lanka on the very day the Buddha passed into final *nirvana*; thus Vijaya, the "victor," is the secular counterpart of the other victor or *jina*, the Buddha himself. What the Buddha is to the spiritual realm (*lokottara*), Vijaya is to the "secular" realm (*laukika*). This is one reason why the name Vijaya is given to the founder of the first Buddhist kingdom and not the name "Sinhala" by which he is known in virtually all non-Sri Lankan texts. The Buddha entrusted Sakra (Indra) to protect Vijaya, and Sakra delegated this task to Visnu who blessed Vijaya when he landed by tying a Buddhist protective charm on his person. Visnu (Upulvan), like Saman before him, becomes one of the guardian deities of the land and a future Bodhisattva. Vijaya married a demoness named Kuveni whom he subsequently betrayed; from this union sprang the Vaddas, the professional hunters of Sri Lanka (many of whom to this day claim Vijaya as their ancestor). Subsequently, in a formal ceremonial, Vijaya married a princess from South Madurapura (in the Tamil country, distinguished from North Madurapura, the land of Krsna). There were no heirs from this marriage, and Vijaya's brother's son was brought from Sinhapura to take over the kingship.[39]

This foundational myth is an inescapable part of the historical consciousness of the Sinhalas from ancient times. Modern scholars have scarcely noted the fact that it is a myth of ethnic separation



*and* integration. The land is consecrated and cleansed of evil spirits by the Buddha for Vijaya to land; the hunters are descended from Vijaya but by an illegitimate union, and hence outside the pale of legitimate kingship and Buddhist history and civilization. The Tamils are affines; they do not inherit the dynasty; it goes back to Pandu Vasudeva, whose name resonates with that of the protagonists of the *Mahabharata*. Yet, unlike the Vaddas, the Tamils are not only kinfolk but also co-founders of the nation. This aspect of the myth has been almost completely forgotten or ignored in recent times. The rest of the Vijaya myth appears everywhere and is so powerful that virtually everyone treats it as an empirically "true" beginning of Sri Lankan history.

Though these founding myths are only poorly developed in the earlier fifth century text, The *Dipavamsa*, they proliferated Sinhala culture from the sixth century onwards, in popular myth, in ritual dramas on the village level and in "ballad" literature (and recently in modern theatre). Few are ignorant of these and even modern empiricist historians treat them as at least a symbolically correct account of the migration and colonization of the country by those funny people, the Aryans, introduced into our local histories by 19th century European historians, archaeologists and other mythmakers. These kinds of charter myths are found all over the world, in almost every culture, but here they are given Buddhist validation.

(3) Let me now come more directly to the Kandy period. A large number of texts coming down from at least the 16th century mention rituals, whether for gods or demons, that start with a standard phrase:

*Sasiri bara, me siri laka*
Heavy with prosperity, this blessed Sri Lanka.

Take the implication of this phrase: it does not express a geographic conception at all, but an imagination of a place. While people had little knowledge of anything like modern physical geography, there is little doubt that for many this place named Sri Lanka was surrounded by an ocean; hence a proliferation of myths of deities

and demons coming in from across the ocean. The fixity of the land mass had important implications that I shall deal with later. Within this imagined space there is an internal geography recorded in *kadaimpot* or boundary books (to be discussed later) that parallels the cosmic geography of Buddhist texts.[40] In addition there were the more fluid territorial domains of the various gods of the pantheon.

**(4)** Following the preliminary incantation quoted above, the Buddhist hierarchy in this place of Sri Lanka is recounted in ritual texts, as in the following stanza:

The noble refuge of the Buddha
The refuge of the Dhamma he taught
And the jewel of the Sangha
With piety we worship these Three Refuges.[41]

Then the great guardian gods are named, followed by a list of minor local deities who exhibit considerable regional variation. Thus, though collective rituals might vary in content from region to region there is recognition of a pan-island hierarchy of named deities, specifically the Buddha and the guardian gods who act as protectors of Buddhism, the state and the place, Sri Lanka. These stanzas occur in village *bali* and *tovil* (planetary and exorcistic) rituals all over the Buddhist (mostly Sinhala speaking) parts of the nation. They cannot be historically dated with any accuracy but from the Neville catalogue of ritual texts in the British Museum it seems that they emerged in their present forms after the 15th century and were written in what one might call "modern Sinhala."

When one moves from these village rituals for gods and demons into Buddhist temples there is a strong standardization of rituals and prayers for the Buddha, in spite of different types of monk orders and fraternities. The Buddha figure is also internalized in the conscience of believers as a benevolent figure, an almost maternal one, though he is formally recognized as a male. This standardization is made possible because Buddhist temples and monks (and other kinds of Buddhist religious virtuosos) are everywhere present and accessible to all. Buddhist temple frescoes



also indicate a strong tendency towards the standardization of popular Buddhist stories. This is not surprising given the fact that Buddhism has been for a long time, a kind of fetishized "book religion." Even when people did not go on distant pilgrimages they often did move outside their villages into other areas when visiting kinfolk, or during military service or for trade purposes. Once out there one might visit a temple or shrine for the gods (the two often located in the same place). At the Buddhist temple there are no boundary problems: people perform standardized prayers and ritual acts because there is a sense in which they share a common "salvation idiom" derived from Buddhism. In my view a common "salvation idiom" acts very much like print capitalism in the formation of a trans-local communal consciousness.

**(5)** Let me now move from Buddhist temples to popular communal and healing rituals performed not by monks but by "priests" variously known as *kattandi, kapurala, yakadura.* I refer to a special class of dramatic enactments performed by these priests and which contains a basic scenario. Two performers enter into the ritual arena and take the role of the Buddhist guardian deities of the island. They hold a stick that acts as a barrier and also as a *kadavata*, literally an entrance to a "city gate;" but at another level of symbolic remove the entrance to Sri Lanka itself. An alien deity or magician or merchant (or groups of them) try to break thorough the barrier and enter Sri Lanka, but the gods prevent them. These aliens speak a funny kind of Sinhala with a strong Tamil accent and they constantly utter malapropisms, unintended puns and spoonerisms. They inadvertently make insulting remarks about the gods at the barrier; they are ignorant of Sinhala and Buddhist customs and the audience has a lot of fun at their expense. Gradually the alien visitors recognize their errors of speech and custom; they learn to speak properly; they begin to properly worship the deities and acknowledge the superiority of the Buddha. Then the gods open the barrier and these aliens enter Sri Lanka.

I think these rituals give symbolic expression to a important historical process: the foreign visitors are "naturalized" as Sri

Lankan Buddhists; and only then can they be "citizens" and permitted to perform *rajakariya* or "work for the king," the legitimate right of citizenship, one might say. These ritual performances parallel what I have previously described and dubbed as "colonization myths" — myths that describe the arrival and incorporation of South Indian people into Sri Lanka and their conversion into Sinhalas.[42] In my work on the goddess Pattini, I have shown how the ritual texts of these migrants were soon translated into Sinhala.[43] These colonization myths and ritual texts dealing with the incorporation of immigrants are of two types: most migratory myths and rituals express the voluntarism of the entrant but there are some myths like that of Gajabahu that depict migrants as captives forcibly settled in Sri Lanka.

**(6)** All these cultural expressions permit the plurality of Sinhalas to imagine themselves as "Buddhists." Yet is imagining a community all that is necessary to create a sense of *belonging* to a community that transcends local boundaries and allegiances? Because there are no "concrete communities" all communities are imagined but imagined in different ways.[44] The ethnographic or historical task is to describe the manner in which communities are imagined. But this is not sufficient: the imagined community even that of a modern nation must be "concretized" in a variety of ways — in collective representations such as parades, political rituals and national events; in gatherings ranging from football to political meetings and so forth. Unlike Durkheim's Australian aboriginal corrobbori[45], these concretized gatherings of modern nations permit mass vicarious participation through their refractions in the media; and these media presentations in turn bring into question the very distinction between imagined and concrete. These diverse representations are intrinsic to the imagining of modern nationhood and they nourish it. The question I pose in respect of Buddhism is this: how is this sense of belonging concretized in Kandyan times? I suggest that, in addition to the participation in common rituals (a "salvation idiom") in village temples, there is the crucial mechanism of the "obligatory



pilgrimage" which I will now describe with an example from Rambadeniya, an isolated village in the northeastern hills of Sri Lanka where Stanley Tambiah and I did fieldwork in 1958-60.[46]

In Rambadeniya, after each harvest, villagers will gather together in a collective thanksgiving ritual for the gods known as the *adukku* ("food offering"). During this festival the priest of the *deva* or deity cults (never the Buddhist monk) pays formal homage to the Buddha and the great guardian deities and then actively propitiates the local gods, especially their main deity known as Bandara Deviyo (Bandara means "chief" rather than "king," the term reserved for the guardian gods). These rituals help define the village as a "moral community" under the benevolent care of Bandara Deviyo. Once every year, however, some of the villagers go to the great pilgrimage center of Mahiyangana, about thirty-five miles away, which the Buddha himself consecrated by his presence. As we proceed through the forest we hang branches or twigs on trees sacred to local deities, implicitly acknowledging that we are no longer under the care of *our* local deity but under the aegis of another whose *sima* or boundary we are now crossing. In a matter of a few hours other villagers taking different pilgrim routes join us and there is a literal and dramatic expansion of the moral community that ultimately becomes a vast sea of heads as we reach Mahiyangana. Right along we sing religious songs mostly in praise of the Buddha, since this is the shared idiom that makes sense in the context of an expanded community. At the pilgrimage site we bathe in the river and purify ourselves and pray to the two guardian gods represented there — Saman and Skanda — and then worship the Buddha and perform exclusively Buddhist rituals. An important shift in allegiances has occurred: villagers have temporarily renounced their parochial local deities and are united under the common worship of the Buddha and the guardian gods. The once separate and discrete moral communities now lose their identities in the larger moral community of Sinhala Buddhists.

A powerful act of concretization has occurred fostering the imagination in a special way, reinforcing and nourishing ideas of

being Sinhala and Buddhist that a person has learned by simply living in his village community and participating in its round of activities. Concretization is a physical, psychical and imaginative experience as Durkheim rightly noted.[47] The trip to Mahiyangana is but one station in an ideal pilgrimage round of sixteen, a number that comes to us from at least the 18th century.[48] Rambadeniya folk rarely made it beyond Mahiyangana in 1958, but all did make it to Mahiyangana some of the time.[49] The obligatory pilgrimage makes it possible for us to identify the "whatever" that eluded thus far: it is *sasana*, a term that could be loosely translated as the Buddhist "church," that is, an expansive and expanding moral community united in common worship.[50] By contrast "nation" is an alien word that has no parallel in the Sinhala lexicon. It is *sasana* that takes its place. In the doctrinal tradition *sasana* refers to the universal Buddhist community or church that transcends ethnic and other boundaries. This meaning coexists with another meaning that is found in post-canonical historical texts: *sasana* is the Buddhist "church" that is particularized in the physical bounds of the land consecrated by the Buddha — in the present instance, Sri Lanka. Here is the word we were looking for: it is the *sasana* of Sri Lanka or, for most purposes, simply, the *sasana. Sasana* in a particularistic sense is locked into Buddhist history; *sasana* in a universalistic sense is locked into Buddhist soteriology. This tension between the two meanings of *sasana* is intrinsic to Buddhist history. Thus King Dutthagamani Abhaya (Dutugamunu), the hero-king who has been resurrected in contemporary Buddhist religious nationalism, is fighting the Tamil unbelievers not for the glory of sovereignty but for the glory of the *sasana* — in its entirely particularistic sense. Sinhalas had no term that could be translated as "nation"; they had a term that belonged to the same polythetic class as nation, namely *sasana.*



# Part Three

## The work of Topographia: Boundary books, Popular histories and Land -Tenure Registers

I mentioned earlier a class of texts known as "boundary books" or *kadaimpot.*[51] *Kadaimpot* belong to a larger class of popular texts written during this period on treated palm leaves (*pus kola*), but neither in Pali, the language of the Buddhist canon, nor in the style of classical Sinhala poetry and prose of this period. Written in colloquial Sinhala by village intelligentsia, by state officials such as scribes, and sometimes by ordinary villagers these texts are of several types. First, the *kadaimpot* already mentioned: they describe the boundaries of the whole island and the boundaries of provinces and districts. These *kadaimpot* are analogous to the *topographia* or local geographies of the Greeks and Romans in the early centuries of the Common Era.[52] Contrary to Anderson, these boundary books indicate an obsessive concern of a pre-modern polity with the demarcation of the island into three major divisions and each division into districts (*rata*) and some of these districts into constituent villages. Second, *vitti pot* or "books of events" that gives us a picture of popular "historical episodes" of the period. Third, *lekam miti* "scribal rolls" of several types, the most important being those land tenure registers of the kings for purposes of revenue collection. These land tenure registers of the court were continued by the Portuguese to keep track of the areas they controlled and were designated as *thombos* by them. Sometimes lineages or families also wrote scribal rolls to keep track or make claims to real estate. All these types of texts give us glimpses of the society of the time, conceptions of "nationhood" and pictures of the migration of peoples from Southern India to Sri Lanka and their "naturalization" as local citizens, denizens of districts and villages. I shall focus primarily on boundary books

(*kadaim pot*) and books of events (*vitti pot*), rather than the land-tenure registers which I have not yet examined carefully, bearing in mind the issues raised in the previous section.

Let me begin with the geography of the island mentioned in at least two books, *Sri Lankadvipaye Kadaim Pota* ("The boundary book of the land (or Island) of Sri Lanka") and *Tri Sinhale Kadaim Pota* ("The boundary book of the Three [divisions of] Sinhale"), the term meaning "Sinhale" implying "the country of the Sinhala people." The first text is the longer one and gives the number of districts or *rata* in Sri Lanka amounting to one hundred and fifteen according to this text. These districts are carefully described in relation to landmarks, such as rivers and mountains and stone boundary markers (some of which can be found even today.) The districts are contained within the three larger political divisions of the country, namely *Maya Rata, Ruhunu Rata* and *Pihiti Rata,* the last identified with the ancient *Raja Rata,* "the country of the kings" with its capital in Anuradhapura and later in Polonnaruva. By the fifteenth century the *Raja Rata* was no longer of any political significance and hence came to be known as *Pihiti Rata,* perhaps meaning "the established division." The *Tri Sinhale Kadaim* is a very short text that simply describes the larger provinces and briefly mentions the cities (*nuvara*) found therein and the places of pilgrimage.

To give the reader a flavor of these topographia let me quote from the description of the boundaries of the *Pihiti Rata* and its cities listed from the *Tri Sinhale Kadaim Pota,* as translated by Abeyawardana.

The boundaries or Pihiti-rata are: The thither bank of Mahavatuva-tota ferry at the mouth of the Mahavali river, the hither side of the ferries of Hembarava, Angunatota, Weragantota and Kimbulgamtota, hither of the wooden bridge (dandupola) at Kemgalla and the ferries of Kundasale, Levalla, Alutgantota, Palugantota, hither of the new road leading to the river mouth and the ferry at Ranavana, hither banks of the streams of Botota, Akurana, Kahavatta and the confluence of these three streams at



Ambatanna, hither of Ikirivatta ferry, and Panagomu ferry at the confluence of the Delvita stream, past the ferry at the Weligamkadulla bank on the crossing from the Ridi Vihara, upwards of the pass at the ferry of Katugomu, upwards of the ferries of Ambagastota, Ganemankada, Budumutta, Giriulla, Namunuvatota, the mouth of the Daduru river and upwards of the pass there, upwards of the *padi-aramudala* (camp of the paid soldiers) an of the Puttalam *kotu-aramudala* (fortress camp) and the battlements at the forts of Arasadi, Mannar, Trincomalee and Jaffna – these then are the boundaries of Pihiti-rata.[53]

The text then mentions that there are 4500 villages within this boundary and also mentions the names of the main "cities" of Pihiti-rata numbering 18 (a formal number); there are nine village divisions (clusters of villages) here and these are further clustered into districts or *pattus* which are named along with the well-known eight places of worship (*siddhasthana*) at Anuradhapura, the ancient capital of the Pihiti-rata.

Let me now comment briefly on these topographia of Sri Lanka. First: the places mentioned in the text just quoted can, with a few exceptions, be identified even today and on that basis one can draw a modern topographical map of the boundaries of the Pihiti-rata (and the two other divisions of the island) and the districts and village divisions. All the "cities" can be identified today; and so could the places of pilgrimage. I am not implying that this topographical propensity is unique to Sri Lanka; on the contrary many societies did possess similar topographia, though perhaps not so empirically oriented as the Sri Lankan ones. It does however bring into questions Anderson's assumption that such a propensity is a privilege of modernity. Second: The numbered lists pose problems that cannot be easily resolved, because simple decimals and other standard numbers such as 9, 18, 12 and multiples thereof appear in these lists. However, this could mean that, like contemporary enumerations, numbers are rounded off in a culturally appropriate manner; or that those who divided the island into spatial units simply employed the standard numerology. This

would be especially true of the smaller units like village divisions and districts or *pattus*. Third: remember that large parts of the Pihiti-rata, such as the contemporary Northern and North-central districts were not so well known to Kandy period topographers because the North was for the most part an independent kingdom of the Tamil kings or the Portuguese and Dutch by conquest and much of the ancient kingdom was now a forested region or *vanni* occupied by "warlords" belonging to Sinhala, Vadda and Tamil speakers with floating allegiances to the Jaffna, Kotte or Kandyan kingdoms. By contrast the Maya and Ruhunu divisions were more populous and controlled or claimed by the kings of Kotte and Kandy. This is reflected in the topographies in respect of villages: there are 712,500 in Ruhunu-rata; the *Tri Sinhala Kadaimpota* does not enumerate the number of villages in the Maya-rata but the more elaborate and detailed topography, the *Sri Lankadvipaye Kadaimpota*, mentions 250,000 villages. Fourth: when one moves to the latter texts, the topographical details are more elaborate. For example, it specifies the different types of villages, the numbers of wells, paddy fields (presumably culled from land tenure rolls) and extensive references to stone boundary markers of villages. In one instance, that of the Pihiti-rata, the number of citizens is enumerated as 42,000 in what must surely be part guesswork. Fifth: one must assume that kings wanted to keep land tenure rolls for taxation purposes; a record of villages would be useful for this purpose as well as for the levying of troops. However, what is the preoccupation with writing the topographies of the whole island? Here I think the colonial presence of the Portuguese is significant, because with the conquest of the maritime regions and later the annexation of the kingdom of Kotte, the old boundaries could no longer be taken for granted. The Portuguese carved out new provinces and districts and planted them with chiefs with traditional titles. It seems to me that the island topographia with the old districts carefully described and bounded must be related to the first colonial presence in the island and the later continuing presence of the Dutch who by right of conquest took over the erstwhile Portuguese territories.



One of the fascinating themes that emerge from the kinds of "intermediate texts" that I have spoken of relate to movements of people, mostly but not exclusively from Southern India.[54] The all-island boundary books do not give much information except to assert the well known "colonization myth" about King Gajabahu settling the island with the prisoners he had captured from the kingdom of Cola (Soli-rata).[55] *The Tri Sinhala Kadaimpota* mentions that "King Gajabahu crossed the sea without getting his feet wet reached the Cola country and brought from there 24,000 captive soldiers of whom 500 were dispatched to this country [Dumbara] and hence the name Pansiyapattu (division of five hundred) of Dumbara."[56] Another division or district is known as Sulugalla Demala Pattuva, "the Tamil district of Sulugalla" (or Hulugalla) which must surely be once occupied by Tamil speakers (but now no longer remembered).

One of the most interesting of references to migrations is depicted in several versions of an event (*vitti*) from the Vanni. Let me summarize the version from Parker. When some princes with armed followers arrived from South India, the followers of a local Vadda chief known as Panikki Vadda informed him of this alien presence. Panikki, who is also termed Panikki Matiyo ("the Minister Panikki," presumably because he was honored with a Muhandiram title by the king) proceeded to the spot with a large force of Vaddas to inquire into the cause of their coming. Panikki translated into Tamil the words of the Vaddas for the benefit of the visitors and made them show him the presents that they had brought for the king. This incidentally indicates bilingualism not just of the Vadda but also I think of others living in an "intermediate language zone." "He then sent his royal master a full report, stating that they carried swords slung from their right shoulders and shields in their left hands, but that they stated that they came as friends, and were in want of food; he awaited instructions. Eventually, he was ordered to feed them, and to allow them to proceed to Sitawaka for an audience with the king. A large guard of Vaeddas under Panikki accompanied them, apparently to see that they caused no damage on the way. The visitors stopped at Munnesaram to pay

their devotions at the temple of Vishnu, who granted them permission to proceed to the king." The king gave them Sinhala names and titles and then gave them rights over several villages in the Vanni. This text contains a literal expression of what I referred to earlier as texts of migration whereby foreigners who come voluntarily into Sri Lanka are incorporated into a Sinhala Buddhist political and social structure. The motive for settling them down is due to two features of the newly emerged kingdoms of Kandy and Kotte, that is, the need for expanding the kingdom and bringing forested area under cultivation and under the political control of the king; and also to supplement the labor force with new recruits for the expanding agricultural economy and to counteract the depletion of labor owing to endemic warfare with the foreign powers.

## From Lanka to Sinhala: A Journey into the Colonial period

The imagination of place is complicated by the fact that there are two fundamental ways of designating the nation — as Lanka or Sri Lanka and as Sinhaladipa, "the island of the Sinhalas." In the period under review both terms are extensively used. In my reading of literally hundreds of ritual texts the term is almost always Sri Lanka; yet when foreign gods or traders come to these shores and hail it as the country of the Sinhala (*sinhaladesa*). However, prior to the movement of civilization to the Southwest and to the Kandyan areas, the situation was quite different. Sri Lanka also seems to be the almost exclusive form of self-designation in the earliest historical texts like The *Mahavamsa*. In the foundational myth, when Vijaya lands in Sri Lanka he is met by the god Visnu in the guise of an ascetic. When Vijaya asks him for the name of the island Visnu tells him: "The island of Sri Lanka."[57] There is no recognition whatever by the *Mahavamsa* that it is designated by any other name. By contrast outsiders often, if not always, designated the island as Sinhaladipa: thus the European term



Ceylon or Ceilao (or any one of its variations) was derived from the Chinese rendering of Sinhaladipa; so is Serendib, the Arabic rendering; and Ilam, which the Tamil guerillas nowadays identify as their homeland ironically means "Sinkalam," "the country of the Sinhalas", according to the Madras Lexicon.[58] A tenth century Nepalese painting refers to a hospital known as the Sinhaldvipa Arogyacala Lokesvara.[59] Perhaps the most important of the outsider references comes from the Mahayana text, the *Saddharmapundarika*. In this text the Buddha Gautama himself was born as Sinhala, a merchant of Sinhakalpa and the son of Sinha (the lion). Sinha and his five hundred followers go in search of precious stones when they were shipwrecked off the coast of the island of Tamradvipa (Tambapanni). They were rescued by celestial nymphs who were in fact demonesses planning to devour the crew. Sinhala married one of them but he was warned by a magic light about his imminent danger; it then informed him that a white winged horse named Balaha will take him and his comrades to safety but no one should open his eyes until they have landed on the further shore. They did as they were bid but all the merchants except Sinhala, smitten by desire and longing, opened their eyes only to drop into the ocean and consumed by the demonesses. Sinhala's demoness-wife appeared in Sinhakalpa and complained to the father about Sinhala's betrayal of her. The father would not listen to the son's admonishing and instead married her. The demoness brought her companions from Tamradvipa and soon devoured the king and other members of this family. The people then proclaimed Sinhala as their king. Sinhala succeeded in banishing the demonesses into the forest; in commemoration of this event Tamradvipa was named Sinhaladvipa.[60]

The major sections of the *Saddharmapundarika* was composed before the third century BC, according to Har Dayal;[61] but the section in which the Sinhala episode is mentioned -- the *Karandavyuha* — was probably composed after the fourth century A.D., that is, before the *Mahavamsa*. It therefore follows that the naming of the island as Sinhaladipa was an old naming convention by outsiders. Yet, how does one interpret this differential naming

procedure? In my interpretation, the divergent terminology indicated that the people living in this place were sensitive to internal ethnic differentiations whereas outsiders adopted a more simplistic naming procedure after the dominant ethnic group. Take the foundational myth of Vijaya: in it the primary outsider ethnic group is the Vaddas even though later the Tamils seem to consume the Sinhala historical imagination. It therefore seems to me impossible for the Sinhalas in ancient times (perhaps at any point in the pre-colonial period) to maintain that their nation was exclusively Sinhaladipa or the land of the Sinhalas, when it was obvious to them from their own ongoing origin myth that the land also belonged to the Vaddas. And if we ignore the foundation myth that only has self-referential significance and go into prehistoric archaeology, it is clear that various groups, including hunters and gatherers existed here long before the Sinhalas.[62]

The propensity for a group to see itself as internally differentiated is nothing unusual. It is also the case with traditional kin groups like clans (and modern corporations like universities); outsiders see it as a single entity whereas the insiders are sensitive to the complexities of internal differentiation and, as far as clans and lineages are concerned, the differences between the perceptions of insiders and outsiders are even given terminological recognition.[63] Yet, in the post-16th century period an important shift seems to have been made: the term Sinhala and Sinhaladipa emerges as a self-referential term along with the older Sri Lanka or Lankadipa.[64] This again has to be related to two phenomena of the time: first, I noted the emergence of migrant communities voluntarily entering Sri Lanka and the rationale for recruiting them as part of the labor force. The Sinhalization process was simultaneously a Buddhicization process (and perhaps a Christianization process in some of the coastal areas). Thus the popular migration myths and rituals of incorporation I mentioned earlier expectably refer to Tamils who become Sinhalas. Second, the coastal areas of the country were in the hands of the Portuguese who now becomes the hated Other in the Sinhala imagination. Tamils have ceased to be the legitimate enemy. The resistance to



the Portuguese (and later the Dutch) was for the most part by the Sinhala people. It seems to me that this tended to reinforce both the Sinhala and the Buddhist part of the identity. This was complicated by the fact that there was a split in the identity; no longer could the Sinhala part of the country be seen as a Buddhist "nation" because the dominant colonial power was Christian. The Sinhala-Catholic communities of the coast for the most part resisted assimilation or incorporation into Sinhala Buddhism.

Let me illustrate the idea that the hated Other was the colonial power with a vignette from around 1558 when the Sinhala king Mayadunne of Sitavaka waged war against his nephew Dharmapala of Kotte (near Colombo). Dharmapala himself was sympathetic to Catholicism and was baptized in 1557 and ceded his kingdom to the Portuguese king in 1580. The Franciscans were busy proselytizing in the coastal areas and in 1556 about 70,000 persons of the *karava* (fisher) caste, along with their leaders, became Catholics in a mass conversion organized by the Franciscans. "Even more disastrous was the donation of all the lands belonging to the hallowed temples of the Buddhist faith to the Franciscan order with all their revenue to be expended to the colleges and seminaries established by them in the Island. The temple complex at Kalaniya [one of the holiest places for Buddhists] on one side of the river and the Dalada Maligawa [the temple containing the tooth relic] on the other side of the river at Kotte were to be transferred to the Franciscans."[65] In this historical situation, da Silva Cosme points out, it was possible for Mayadunne to "pose as a champion of Buddhism." "An eminent Buddhist monk took up Mayadunne's cause and so did a renegade Portuguese Buddhist ... [and] it was argued and harangued in public that Dharmapala had forfeited his right to the throne the moment he embraced Christianity just as Christian princes of the Catholic faith did the moment they became heretics. ... Some of the monks stepped into Kotte and fomented trouble at bana [sermon] preaching at night. Dharmapala and Diogo de Mello and the bodyguards stepped out of the palace to investigate and met a surging crowd led by Buddhist monks. A hail of stones injured the royal face."[66]

Da Silva Cosme's information is derived from Father Queyroz's voluminous history and is rare in the published historical literature.[67] But surely similar occurrences must have been more common? The political situation of the time meant that the Portuguese (and later the Dutch and the British) as the alien Other replaced Tamil Otherness at least among the generality of the public living outside the areas of colonial control.

## Taming Otherness: The Collective Representations at Mahiyangana

The Buddhist *sasana* in Sri Lanka is not what we imagine it today. I have shown its transformations in colonial times particularly in the 19th century in what I have labeled Protestant Buddhism (or Buddhist modernism, if you prefer that term). In contemporary discourse in Sri Lanka the main dialectical opposition is between Sinhala and Tamil; most Sinhalas are Buddhist and most Tamils are Hindu. Sinhala Buddhists self-consciously feel that the nation has been historically a Buddhist one and that the main oppositional conflict was between Tamil-Hindus and Sinhala-Buddhists. I have myself made a case for such a dialectical opposition but now I want to introduce what I believe is the more fundamental structural opposition in Sri Lanka that has had a long historical run, namely, between the Vadda hunters and Sinhala Buddhist agriculturalists, in effect a distinction between Buddhists and non-Buddhists that has profound implications for our understanding of Buddhist history up to at least the 18th century.

Vaddas (from the Sanskrit *vyadha,* "hunter") are today a remnant of a few thousand "aborigines" scattered in the area around Maha Oya near Mahiyangana. My current research shows however that Vaddas were a ubiquitious presence and that groups labeled "hunters" were everywhere in the island. I cannot describe here in any detail the historical and cultural role of the Vaddas but for now I shall get back to the foundational myth that depicts the



ideal-typical relationship between Vadda and Sinhala and then proceed to a discussion that gives ritual expression to that relationship.

In foundation myth Vijaya married Kuveni and later banished her and his two children by that marriage. We noted that out of this union of brother and sister sprang the Pulindas ("hunters", that is, Vaddas). The myth implies that the Vaddas are kin of the Sinhalas through Vijaya, yet are separate from them, having been banished into the forest and living by hunting, a very un-Buddhist profession. The charter myth for the opposition between hunting and Buddhism is known to most Buddhists and is first presented in the *Mahavamsa*, which describes the Buddhist saint (*arahant*) Mahinda flying through the air and landing in the mountain of Mihintale where the king (Devanampiyatissa, 250-210 BCE) was out hunting. Not only was the king converted but also the place of this archetypically wrong act became a meditation site for the first monks and a center of Buddhist worship and pilgrimage. This myth does not explicitly deal with Vaddas but rather with the un-Buddhist culture of hunting yet it and others like it help illustrate the manner in which Vaddas were perceived by the dominant group as an alien community in their midst, even though linked to them by historic and economic ties. This notion of likeness and difference is beautifully expressed in the dramatic ritual known as the *vadi perahara* ("procession of the Vaddas") performed during the annual festival at Mahiyangana, known in the Kandyan period literature as Bintanna-Alutnuvara. Like the footprint of the Buddha in Sumanakuta Peak in Sabaragamuva, the Buddhist shrine indicated the hegemony of the Buddhists over the hunting population. Today, alongside this Buddhist stupa (relic chamber) and temple, there are also shrines for Saman and Skanda, major gods common to both Sinhalas and Vaddas. My description of the Vadda procession is based on the rituals I witnessed in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In one of these rituals seventy-one Vaddas carrying poles that represented spears line up near the shrines of the god Saman and

Skanda are led by a "chief" carrying a bow and arrow. After circumambulating the shrine three times in a graceful dance, the Vaddas suddenly increase the tempo and, at a signal from the chief, start hooting, yelling and brandishing their spears and terrifying the assembled Sinhala spectators. They stage several battles in front of the shrine by "assaulting" it, striking their spears on its steps. They then run toward the Buddhist temple and try to enter the premises of the stupa, where the Buddha relics are enshrined. Here gatekeepers (*murakarayo*) block their path and shout, "You can't approach this place. Go back to the royal altar" (*rajavidiya*, the altar of the guardian deity). These mock battles are repeated several times and end with the Vaddas placing their "spears" gently against the stupa and worshipping it. They then run towards the monks' residence (*pansala*), stage a battle there and, as at the stupa, they end up by worshiping the assembled monks. Then, from the monks' residence back to the shrine where they again perform a "battle" beating their spears against its stone steps until the spears break into small pieces; and finally they fall prostrate on the ground to worship the gods housed in their shrine (*devale*). After this they run toward the nearby river ("the ferry crossing of the gods") and bathe and purify themselves. Returning to the shrine, calm and self-possessed, they are now permitted to enter the inner sanctum where the Sinhala priest (*kapurala*) chants an incantation for the gods Saman and Skanda and other major deities, and blesses the Vaddas by lustrating them with "sandal water". The ritual ends with the Vaddas all shouting *haro-hara* which in Sri Lanka is the paean of praise for the god Skanda, the great guardian deity of Sri Lanka and formal overlord of both the Vadda and the Sinhala pantheon.

The difference in the social functions of the rituals performed by the Sinhalas and the Vaddas at Mahiyangana are impressive. In the case of the Sinhalas there are no rituals that separate one group from the other: all the assembled Sinhalas form one moral community participating in common worship at Mahiyangana. In the case of the Vaddas, the rituals define their status in relation to



the dominant religion in that they are prevented from entering the temple and stupa. Though they are made to formally acknowledge the Buddha, they are clearly outside the community of Sinhala-Buddhists. Yet they are not total strangers either; after initially resisting the gods Skanda and Saman, they finally acknowledge the fact that these deities also head their own pantheon. Further, it must be recognized that the guardian deities, are not only protectors of the Buddhist religion: they are also protectors of the secular realm. The Vaddas are incorporated into the "state" structure; not into the Buddhist "nation" or *sasana* symbolically represented in the stupa. Their incorporation into the political order of the Kandyan state is recognized in another part of the *vadi perahara*; the Vaddas rub their bodies with honey and then cover themselves with cotton wool. Honey is the substance they used to collect as the king's due or *rajakariya*; it is likely that some Vaddas were also the suppliers of cotton cultivated in forest clearings or small garden plots. We know both from Knox and from early Dutch accounts that cotton was a crucial local industry, later destroyed by British colonialism. Supplying cotton must have been an important historical role for some Vaddas and this is recognized in the foundation myth itself that says that when Kuveni first met Vijaya she was spinning cotton.[68]

The level in which the Vaddas are incorporated into the larger symbolic order shared by both communities is not on the level of Buddha worship but that of the guardian deities. In the present time the great guardian god that unites Vadda and Sinhala (and both with Tamils) is Skanda who is the overlord of the Vadda pantheon (the *Mahavamsa* evidence suggests that in ancient times it was the god Saman). This integration is given further symbolic validation in the mythology of Valli Amma, who was adopted by the Vaddas as a child and became Skanda's illegitimate spouse or second wife. Rituals and practices at Kataragama recognize the Vadda connection in many ways. For example, prior to the present enbourgeoisment of Kataragama it was permitted to sell venison near the shrine premises and venison was also offered as part of the *adukku* or meal given to the god. Similar techniques of

articulating Vadda with Sinhala were practiced in village rituals. Thus, in Sinhala communal post-harvest thanksgiving rituals there is a sequence called the *vadi dane* (Vadda alsgiving) or *vadi pujava* (the Vadda offering); it is likely that this too was an attempt to bring in Vaddas into the Sinhala-Buddhist ritual scheme of things on the village level. In some rituals there are actors who represent Vaddas and they are permitted to eat meat substances, not in reality but in mimesis. Whereas no meat, cooked or otherwise, was ever brought into the ritual arena in Buddhist village rituals.

The most interesting incorporation of Vaddas into Sinhala village ritual occurs in the ritual cycle known as the *gammaduva*, a post-harvest ritual in honor of the Buddhist goddess Pattini. The myth goes as follows:

> After the goddess Pattini destroyed the city of Madurai, the Vaddas decided to honor her since there was no one like her in the three worlds. The king of the Vaddas proclaimed to his people that Pattini was on her way to their "city" after setting Madurai on fire. He ordered his people to clean up the city by removing sticks and stones, so that they might honor this Buddha-to-be. The Vaddas then constructed a hall or maduva for performing pujas in her honor. They hung leopard skins as a canopy, and streamers of betel leaves and branches for decorations. The walls also were of leopard and deerskins. They lit lamps and burned incense in her honor. They had skins for carpets and meals prepared with uru vi ("pig rice", an inferior rice).[69]

The Vadda offering, from the point of view of a pure goddess like Pattini, is outrageously polluting and hence the God Sakra summoned Dala Kumara or Gara, the demon who swallows impurities, to earth. The goddess saw him and gave him a warrant to take the offerings for himself. Dala Kumara went to Vadda land, frightened all the Vaddas, and gobbled up everything, the food as



well as the physical structures. Pattini then gave Dala Kumara permission to accept various rituals and on her behalf from the Vaddas. Then she witnessed the dances, drumming, and other displays of the Vaddas in her honor.

What this myth seems to indicate is the following: Vaddas are permitted to bring meat offerings to the *gammaduva* rituals for Pattini, but these are accepted by Gara or Dala Kumara who consumes impurities. Offerings to Gara are made at an altar or *massa* outside the ritual arena. In any case a strong opposition between the meat-eating Vaddas and the pure deity of agriculturalists is suggested. As I interpret it, the *vadi pujava,* like the previous rituals, is a mechanism for incorporating Vaddas into the religious and social structure of adjacent agricultural communities while at the same time recognizing their separateness. For Buddhists these rituals like the procession of the Vaddas at Mahiyangana was a way of recognizing their own separate identity as members of the *sasana* in opposition to those who are not.

## The creation of Axiomatic Identities

In our previous discussion I made the point that Buddhists had a conception of a translocal cultural consciousness that was conceptualized in the notion of *sasana.* Our conception of *sasana* is a "form of nationhood" constructed by the ethnographer on the basis of a phenomenological reality existing in Sri Lankan culture and consciousness. Not so with "identity" which is a conceptual invention of the analyst. There is no word that resembles "identity" in the Sinhala lexicon. This is also true of the concept "axiomatic identity." In my usage "axiomatic identity" refers to those statuses and social positions that one takes for granted as true and valid and which carry an important though varying emotional investment, the root of which is "birth." Thus "son" is a "status" or "position" in the conventional sociological sense of a bundle of rights and duties; as an *identity* however it is associated with "birth" together with emotional investments of various kinds, such as feelings of filial piety as well as all sorts of ambivalences. As

a status it is taken for granted; but this taken-for-granted-ness can get a jolt if, for example, I begin to question whether my father deserves my love or whether fatherhood is not a bourgeois institution that ought to be abolished, and so forth. The questioning of axiomatic identities, precisely because of their taken-for-granted quality, can be profoundly troubling and agonizing. Axiomatic identities are woven into one's sense of worth, wholeness (Erikson's "ego identity") and well-being. When one talks of an axiomatic identity one can also examine the processes whereby an identity is created, reproduced, broken, changed and reconstituted. Thus the Freudian Oedipal crisis is, among other things, a process whereby an identity crisis pertaining to the axiomatic identity of son-ship takes place. The processes or mechanisms that help create identity formation can also be depicted, such as the "introjection" of paternal values and "identification" with the father. This means that what is poured into the taken for granted identity "son" can have differing contents poured into it even in a single culture.

I do not want to make a sharp distinction between individual and group identities for, following Freud, the individual does not stand alone but is related as brother, sister, father, spouse and so forth to a larger entity, the family, and, I might add, to even larger structures like lineages and clans.[70] While recognizing the fuzziness of these boundaries let me nevertheless, for heuristic purposes, refer to group identities that also have an axiomatic quality, as, for example, caste identities; or lineage identities; or that of ranks such as aristocracies; or, in the largest sense, that of modern nations; or even the emerging forms of transnational identities like that of an universalizing Islamic cultural consciousness; or that recent formation struggling to emerge, namely, European-ness. In all of these cases axiomatic identity is an end product or consciously or unconsciously sought as one. Yet this end product did not emerge out of the blue; there had to be a lot of work to create it. Even when the axiomatic identity is one that is already in place it must be reproduced or recreated or refashioned according to changing socio-historical circumstances.



Axiomatic identities need not necessarily produce intolerance, though that possibility always exists for some identities. To say one is French is certainly to say one is not Dutch or English; it need not be a statement about enmity. However in times of crises such as wars or football games, the axiomatic identity gets an infusion of passion and commitment; and it gets sharpened in opposition to an equally simplistically defined and opposed Other. Thus strengthening-weakening is a dialectical process inextricably associated with axiomatic identities. Naturally these processes depend on historical circumstances that must be contextualized for each case.

I noted that the critical feature of axiomatic identity is *birth*: it is the one incontestable feature of any kin relation or membership of a lineage, caste or nation and so forth. Thus the popular word for caste in many South Asian languages is *jati* meaning "birth." The modern word for "race" is *jati*; when Sinhalas nowadays think of themselves as a nation they also use the term *jati*. The etymology of the European word "nation" is also birth. What modern nationhood has in effect created, as Eugen Weber shows for France, is to refigure the idea of "birth" associated with all sorts of axiomatic identities by transfusing it into a larger domain, namely, nation — an enormously difficult and complicated work of culture.[71] Being born into a group identity is in fact the critical mechanism that renders an identity axiomatic. In European thought an identity associated with birth is "natural," a *cultural* idea resonates in other traditions, for example, in the ritual dramas discussed earlier where the alien is assimilated through forms of cultural learning (or in other cases through marriage). In Europe the person who adopts an axiomatic identity of a citizen of a nation state has therefore to be "naturalized." Similar cultural ideas are found in Sri Lanka in those texts that "naturalize" alien immigrants. A nice example is recorded in the second version of the *Matale Kadaimpota* where a reference is made to a Tamil person whose birth status or *jati* is uncertain; therefore this person (an immigrant) is placed in a *gattara* village, that is, a place where persons of mixed and uncertain identities are cast. In fact there are named

villages in the contemporary Western and Southern provinces that are designated as *demala gattara (gattara* villages of Tamils).[72]

Parallel with this is another notion in modern nationhood: birth is not in any place but in a particular "land." Yet such metaphors are also found in the pre-colonial Sri Lankan case: this blessed isle, this Sri Lanka — blessed by the Buddha himself as a place where the *sasana* will flourish. In modern times even more powerful familial metaphors are invoked in both nationalistic and ethnic discourses everywhere: patria, fatherland, and motherland. In the latter instance the violation of the land is associated with sexual violation and rape of the mother. Patria is associated with juridical rights that have to be defended in the name of the father, often associated with duty. Both can lead to an extraordinary level of violence.

The precursor to violence is the passion that one associates with nationalist cultural identity. This is why I find Anderson's attempt to divorce nationalism from racism, and patriotism misleading; you can have racism without nationalism but as a special kind of axiomatic identity sharing family resemblances to nationalism, it can easily spill over to the latter. Let me phrase the issue in another way. Some scholars, following Edward Shils, have dealt with the resurgence of "primordial loyalties" in the non-Western discourses on nationalism and fundamentalism, replacing the earlier equally pejorative term "tribalism." We are told that in the West these primordial loyalties have been replaced by the more rational discourses of nationalism. The position I take is very different: "primordiality" is a sine qua non of most European nationalisms, and, as the work of scholars like Linda Colley and Eugen Weber have demonstrated, it was an essential condition in the formation and perpetuation of French and English nationalisms, both based on opposing identities, rooted in two religions, Protestantism and Catholicism. By contrast, primordiality in the older sociological imagination is the idea that a particular identity comes from a long past, evoking passionate (xenophobic) responses that seem almost innate (primordial), a "gut reaction" one might even say. But in my view, this is not something confined to "the rest": whether it be tribes threatened by other tribes, or



religious sects warring with each other, or nations in a similar situation, make not the slightest difference because primordiality has to be culturally constructed and fostered through wars and other mechanisms and hooked into the historical consciousness of a group through the myths and literary products of an age ranging from serious literature to jingoistic national anthems such as "La Marseillaise." European primordiality is the spirit or "geist" of a nation that German romanticists like Fichte (and later Heidegger) have fetishized and went in distorted fashion into Hitler's Germany. Primordiality may be submerged under certain conditions, let us say in times of peace or prosperity, but they are ready to be reawakened when an axiomatic identity is threatened — be it an oedipal, tribal or national or even a transnational one.

As far as Buddhists are concerned the tension between the two meanings of *sasana* resurface in the historically constructed and then essentialized (and sometimes primordialized) axiomatic identity. Buddhist soteriology denies any enduring reality to the body or the self: the doctrine emphasizes the fluctuating and senseless nature of all structures of existence. Therefore an axiomatic identity in Buddhist soteriological terms is a kind of "false consciousness." Nevertheless such an identity is the self-perceived "true consciousness" of Buddhist history and lived existence in different periods of its history. Thus, in Buddhist history, there is expectably a continual Buddhicization (i.e.,a *sasanization*) of South Indian groups, including their gods, magical practices, language and texts, which if translated into the European language game is a form of life that is called "naturalization." Viewed in long term historical perspective Sinhalas have been for the most part South Indian migrants who have been *sasanized.* It is interesting to note that *sasanization* embraced most but not all the castes in the Sinhala system. *Sasanization* has been facilitated by the relative absence of contestation by immigrant groups in areas dominated by Sinhala speech communities. A parallel process perhaps took place in the northern peninsula that after the 15th century at least was controlled by Kerala and Tamil peoples who in their own way assimilated previous Sinhala speakers.[73]

Because an axiomatic identity is often given at birth it may seem to us ready made, as it were. Yet, this initial birth assigned nature of an axiomatic identity, while intrinsic to its character, is only a formal feature. Axiomatic identities have to be learned and contents poured into them and this can be a complicated process. Take even a simple case. I am born as a son, but this is not sufficient to create an axiomatic identity because I have to learn the rights and duties and the affective ingredients that go to constitute son-ship in my culture. Again: the puberty rites that we know from many preliterate societies give content, meaning and affective valence to the idea of belonging to a particular kinship and social group, helping to create an axiomatic identity or identities through special kinds of learning experiences, some none too pleasant. Thus, an axiomatic identity is an end-product and an ideal condition, whether we are talking about a kinship or "tribal" status or the cultural identity of being a member of a nation. If the cultural identity Sinhala-Buddhist is an ideal condition that can be realized as the end-product of socializing strategies and cultural practices (what is labeled "habitus" by Pierre Bourdieu), then one can legitimately speak of this identity as existing in a variety of imperfect conditions where such strategies did not exist.[74]

Let me give an illustrative example. Rambadeniya from where I embarked on my pilgrimage is Sinhala; there is no question of it because that is the language they speak and it is their self-conscious identity. Yet there was no Buddhist temple there in the late fifties; neither was there any in Gangahenvela, a nearby hamlet; nor in some of the other villages in the area. On important occasions Rambadeniya folk invited the monk from the nearby village of Atanvala to perform religious ceremonies like *pirit* recitals and they had a sermon hall or *bana maduva* for this purpose. It struck us that Rambadeniya folk, though Sinhala, were not fully incorporated within the frame of Buddhist culture at that time. For example, all of them used to hunt and hunting was not



considered a demeaning activity. On one occasion, on Vesak day itself, the headman of the village used poisonous herbs to kill the fish in the local river, something unthinkable in most Buddhist villages.[75] The memory was still strong of a time when, the night prior to the holding of a Buddhist ceremony or *pinkama*, Rambadeniya folk had to have a ritual to ask the "forgiveness" of the *yakku* (nowadays meaning "demon").[76] I felt that this society was at one time culturally close to those of the Vaddas in whose proximity they now live. And it is Vaddas who use the term *yakku* without any pejorative connotation, as for example when they call their dead ancestors *na yakku* ("kinfolk deities"). Thus, it was likely that Rambadeniya was a Sinhala speaking non-Buddhist village, or a purely formal Buddhist village, which now has become, imperfectly even at the time of our field work, a Sinhala-Buddhist one.[77] Here then is a situation where *sasanization* had been going on for some time. I think this is no isolated example and one must therefore see *sasanization,* like nationalism, as an ongoing cultural process.

## Restoring History and Indeterminacy in Cultural Identity

Because axiomatic identities have a paradoxical character of being seen by people living in a society as essentialized or even primordial and seen by the analyst or a detached outsider as something culturally constructed, it is time to put this notion back into the vortex of history from which it was abstracted earlier. Let me get back to Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood* which shows how the emerging sense of national consciousness in England was supported and given literary expression by several Elizabethan writers — poets, historians, dramatists, philosophers, travel writers, and writers of Apocalyptic texts. Helgerson says: "To men born in the 1550s and 1560s, things English came to matter with a special intensity both because England itself mattered more than it had

and because other sources of identity and cultural authority mattered less."[78] To rephrase what I think Helgerson is saying: these Elizabethan texts might give you an account of the cultural identity of "Englishness;" but more importantly they are diverse and sometimes opposed ways of constructing such an identity. For example, in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (popularly known as the "Book of Martyrs" and running into 2314 pages), the church is both universal and particularistic, very much like the Sinhala concept of *sasana*. Foxe and other apocalyptic thinkers, argues Helgerson, created an imagined community of Protestant martyrs who in a sense existed outside the state. Yet, he also supplies the evidence and arguments for later thinkers for whom Protestantism and Englishness are inextricably linked.[79] If Foxe is the apocalyptic thinker, the legalistic Richard Hooker is the "apologetic historicist" in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. But Hooker, like other Elizabethan writers, also tried in his own way to create the idea of an English nation that, in his case, should not conflict with the state. "We hold that ... there is not any man of the Church of England but the same man is also a member of the commonwealth; nor any man a member of the commonwealth which is also not of the Church of England."[80] Thus different visions of the English national and cultural identity were being created by a variety of writers. The end product of these activities is to foster an axiomatic identity of being English. After the union of the England, Scotland and Wales in 1707, Linda Colley demonstrates that the emerging identity was *being British*. The subtitle of this book "forging the nation" has a double significance; it is creating nationhood as in a forge and also practicing a kind of forgery or a fabrication of the nation.

Now we can I think get a better insight into the historical "texts" written by monks. The *Mahavamsa* is not just a text that gives us information on the Sinhala-Buddhist identity; much more importantly *it is a text that helps to create such an identity* in a way that the previous chronicle, the *Dipavamsa*, did not. And central to that process of identity creation is the hero, Dutthagamani



Abhaya, the man who conjoins the land or the place, Sri Lanka, with the *sasana*, already blessed by the Buddha as a place where the Dhamma will flourish. The *Mahavamsa* then attempts to forge the nation in the double sense of that term. The historical period in which this forging took place is not the time of Dutthagamani Abhaya but the time in which the *Mahavamsa* was composed, namely the sixth century CE. From that time on it seems to me that the process of forging and forgery went on with its ups and downs, as in other nations. It seems futile to construct an omnipresent Sinhala-Buddhist identity on the basis of the *Mahavamsa*, as it is to deny its non-reality. However, the evidence from the Sigiri Grafitti suggests that Sinhala people from distant places were meeting each other in pilgrimage centers between the eight and twelfth centuries.[81] A common script and a spoken language with miniscule dialectal variations spurred this communion; it is likely that the obligatory pilgrimage and the movement of peoples in turn tended to erode dialectal variations.

The literature of the 14th century indicates a language and script that is remarkably close to modern Sinhala. One of these texts is the *Pujavaliya* which has an extraordinary account of the Buddhist identity in its thirty-second chapter entitled *Uddesika Puja Katha* which is a synoptic history of Sri Lanka from its very founding. Let me render this text into reasonable English.

Sri Lanka in non-Buddhist times (*abaudhakalaya*) was entirely the home of demons (*yaksas*) but during the dispensation of the Buddhas (*baudhopadakalaya*, lit., when Buddhas arise or are born) by humans. Several previous Buddhas at their very enlightenment controlled (or destroyed) the *yaksas* and the country became home to humans; other Buddhas actually visited this country, defeated the *yaksas*, and established the *sasana*. Since during the enlightenment of countless Buddhas, the right branch of the Bodhi tree and the *dhammadhatus* ("essence-teaching") will no doubt be preserved, this island of Lanka is like a treasury of the Triple Gem [that is, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha][82]. Just as the demons could not find permanence here, neither can this land become a place of residence for non-believers

(*mityadrusti gatavunge vasaya*). If any non-believer becomes a king of Sri Lanka by force at any time, that dynasty will not last owing to the special influence of the Buddha. Because this Lanka is rightfully those of kings who have right views [Buddhists], their rightful dynastic tenure (*kula praveniya*) will absolutely prevail. For these various reasons the kings of Sri Lanka are drawn by a natural love of mind to the Buddha, and will establish the *sasana* without delay or neglect and protect the wheel of the law and the wheel of the doctrine and reign so that the rightful dynastic tenure will be preserved.[83]

The text adds that in the time of the very first Buddha of our *kalpa*, Kakusanda, this land was called *ojadvipa*, that is, the land that contains the creative life force or *ojas*. At that time Anuradhapura was called Abhayapura and the king was Abhaya ... ... The Buddha Kakusanda, knowing the great meritoriousness of its citizens and spurred by great kindness (*karuna*), accompanied by a retinue of 40,000 noble monks flew through the air and landed at the mountain named *devakuta*, that is, Mihintale. The text describes the citizens who gathered there making offerings to the Buddha; it then mentions the various sacred spots in Anuradhapura consecrated by the Buddha Kakusanda during that visit. Other Buddhas of the age (*kalpa*), namely, Konagamana, Kasyapa, and finally our own Buddha Gautama, repeated these visits.[84]

I cannot analyze this extraordinary text here in any detail except to suggest that it outdoes the *Mahavamsa* in its myth of an eternal return, namely, that this land is a Buddhist one consecrated by the four Buddhas of our age (*kalpa*) and some Buddhas of previous ages. There is no question that non-believers can last here; only Buddhist kings have just tenure. In doctrinal Buddhism the *sasana* can only be established by a Buddha; here the *sasana* of Sri Lanka is established by Buddhist kings. In my view this statement is more important than the *Mahavamsa* one because it is written in Sinhala and accessible to ordinary laypersons either through direct reading or through public recitals or monk sermons. Yet, it too has to be seen in historical context. The *Pujavaliya* was written soon



after the devastating invasion in 1214 of Magha of Kalinga (in Orissa) who brought a lot of South Indian mercernaries. These invasions combined with historical forces that made coastal trade lucrative, resulted in the movement of Sinhala civilization to the southwest. There is a desperation in the tone of the text; hence its preoccupation with the eternal return of Buddhas to Sri Lanka. Anuradhapura has already been abandoned as the capital; hence the nostalgia for it and the idealization of that city.

Now let me deal with a interesting problem that arises from our reading of both the *Pujavaliya* and the *Mahavamsa*. It is indeed the case that to be Sinhala is *ipso facto* to be Buddhist: they are twin facets of the same identity. Yet, on the other hand, to be Buddhist is not necessarily to be Sinhala because some people knew, particularly the monks who wrote these texts, that there were Buddhists who were not Sinhala. The question is: which facet of the twin identity is the dominant one? The *Mahavamsa*, and most certainly the *Pujavaliya*, are clear that it is Buddhist side of the identity that is dominant. I think the reason is not too far to seek: the emphasis on the Buddhist aspect of the identity would make a lot of sense to monks because they had continual historical contact with South Indian Buddhists; the Tamil country itself contained urban centers of Buddhism. It is hard to believe that there were no Tamil Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka, among them those who invaded the island and were being assimilated into the social structure of their neighbors. And we know that as late as the middle 15th century, there were Tamil monks studying in Sri Rahula's Buddhist University (*pirivena*) at Totagamuva and Tamil itself was part of curriculum there.

## Back to the Past: Unfreezing Tamil-Hindu Otherness

In today's ethnic conflict the Tamils are the radical (sometimes hated) Other for many Sinhalas; the feeling is mutual as far as the Tamils are concerned except that for the latter there also exists

the Muslim Others in their own midst. It is a mistake to think that this is an ancient conflict rooted in the nation's history, though it is a form of primordialism that occasionally erupts in that history. The fact that history imagines a Buddhist *sasana* in the island of Sri Lanka does not mean that the Tamils were exclusively depicted as enemies. So was it in other nations where national or ethnic identities surface in history. One must therefore avoid two kinds of "prejudices." First, the European language game that often defines "Otherness" as a radically exclusive conception. One can be an "other" in respect of some specific defining feature or attribute but not in respect of another. Second, a contemporary Sri Lankan prejudice, also shared by scholars, which in "retrojecting" the past from the present, have read the *Mahavamsa* simply as a text that represented the Tamils as enemies who should be destroyed. One might disagree with Paul Ricouer that written texts get frozen in time; but textual freezing can certainly happen during ethnic conflicts in the era of print capitalism.

Yet a critical reading of the *Mahavamsa* itself and, more generally, a broader look at the Sinhala-Buddhist imagination, suggest that Tamils (the generic Sinhala terms for South Indians) appear in history in a variety of guises that I shall now briefly summarize.

I assume that during periods of invasions from South India Tamils were viewed as hated Others by a plurality of Sinhala-Buddhists opposed to them. But Tamils were also historically allies of the Sinhalas; Sinhala kings sought the aid of Tamil kings in their local conflicts. Some kings fled to India to seek the aid of their Tamil allies while others cemented alliances by marrying Tamil queens. But there was no consistency in this latter project either. In some periods in history the popular imagination records that the offspring of Tamil queens were illegitimate or inferior to Sinhala ones; this is reversed at other times. These marriage alliances were not only a historical reality for both commoners and kings but they also refract back into the foundational myth giving legitimacy to intermarriages for, according to that myth's proclamation, the union



of Vijaya and his followers with the Tamils from Madurapura produced the Sinhalas. Thus Sinhalas have Tamil blood, since "blood" is bilaterally inherited in Sinhala genetic theory.

Tamils can be kings, though subsequently Sinhalized and brought within the frame of the Buddhist *sasana*. Some of the greatest Sinhala kings had South Indian origins, though not necessarily from the Tamil country: for example, Nissanka Malla (1187 - 1196), Kirti Sri Rajasinha (1741 - 1780) and Bhuveneka Bahu VI (1469- - 1477) who, as Sapumal Kumaraya, was one of the great heroes of the Sinhalas and, ironically, the conqueror of the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna![85]

To come back to the Kandy period that saw the rise of the Nayakkar dynasty (1739-1815). Though these kings spoke both Tamil and Telegu they were also Buddhists and also spoke Sinhala. The generality of the public, for the most part, accepted them as kings of Sri Lanka, even though there was also some public debate regarding their Tamil origins and consequently also of their legitimacy. The last Sinhala king of Kandy was Narendra Sinha (1707-1739); when he died his wife's brother became king as Sri Vijaya Rajasinha. Rajasinha is a common enough name for kings of this period in both Sri Lanka and South India but not Vijaya; in taking the name Vijaya the new king was tapping a powerful symbolic resource because the first king of Sri Lanka was not only named Vijaya but he married from Madurapura, that is, the Madurai country. Madurapura had considerable symbolic power for the generality of the Sinhalas of that time and it is likely that this was one of the motivations that led Kandyan kings to marry from Madurai.

Consider the case of Kirti Sri Rajasinha (1747-1782). Owing to the recurrent wars and unrest in the country the Buddhist ordination had lapsed and the country did not have a single monk to carry out the ordination ceremonies (*upasampada*). As the patron of Buddhism the king enlisted the help of the Dutch to send a mission to Thailand to bring monks to revive the Buddhist ordination. In spite of his contribution to the Buddhist cause,

Sarankara, the Buddhist patriarch (*sangaraja*), in conjunction with some members of the aristocracy planned his assassination (which failed). There is much historical evidence to show that some monks were opposed to the Nayakkar on the grounds of Tamil alien-ness; others on the grounds that they daubed themselves with holy ash, an action that indicated a commitment to Saivism than Buddhism. Dharmadasa is probably right that the Nayakkar period produced debates regarding the moral legitimacy of the Nayakkars, some emphasizing their Tamilness and others their lack of genuine commitment to Buddhism.[86] But it is as likely that the vast majority of the Sinhala people simply viewed these kings as Buddhist monarchs. It is important to realize that, unlike in the *Mahavamsa* the Tamil king is never represented as an enemy of the *sasana.* It is British propaganda by their master spy, the despicable D'Oyly that fuelled the illegitimacy of the last Nayakkar king and his unfitness to rule Sri Lanka.

Nevertheless, the ambiguous status of the Nayakkars is reflected beautifully in one of the boundary books known as the *Matale Kadaimpota* (version 2) attributed to the reign of Kirti Sri Rajasinha: "The country of King Kirti Sinha is Madurapura. [Yet] he is not a Tamil person (*daru,* that is, child or descendant). He belongs to the Sinhala royal family. When Parakramabahu [probably the great Sinhala king of the 15th century] was reigning he married from Madura. Because this king had no children his mother's lineage [from Madura] acquired the right to rule in Sri Lanka." To the author of this text the Kirti Sri Rajasinha was a Tamil who was not a Tamil by virtue of the ancient marital connection with, most likely, Parakramabahu VI (1415-1467), who had a Tamil (Chola) ancestry and might well have had a woman from Madurai as one of his wives, though no historical evidence is available for the latter hypothesis.[87]

When one moves from the court politics of the Kandy period and begin to look at popular practices, the blurring of boundaries becomes even clearer. As is well known the relationship between Hindu and Sinhala Buddhist becomes fuzzy on the sub-doctrinal level. For example, most of the major guardian deities of the



operative Buddhist pantheon are also Hindu gods, subsequently given Buddhist meaning and significance. But this permits Tamil Hindus to worship at shrines in the heart of the Buddhist country, especially the shrine of Murugan-Skanda at Kataragama. Because the Buddha was the eleventh avatar of Visnu, Tamils could as easily worship the Buddha. For Buddhists the god Visnu has been converted into a Bodhisattva, effectively becoming an "avatar" of the Buddha. Further, many of the lesser gods and demons have South Indian backgrounds. It is not surprising therefore that the kind of popular texts discussed earlier, have specific references to Tamil religious specialists, especially *pantarams* or non-Brahmin priests; and *andi*, a motley group of wandering ascetics and practitioners of magic. Place names like Andi-ambalama (the resting place of the *andi*s) indicate their peripatetic presence. More generally one could say that a persistent historical image of "Tamils" (from Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Orissa) is as sorcerers and ritual specialists. Even today in spite of the enormous hostility to them some of the most popular shrines for Buddhists are the Kali temples at Munneswaram, thirty-five miles north of Colombo, and in the city of Colombo itself, both controlled by Tamil priests. In Colombo there are Tamil priests who have recently set up an institution for reading *nadi vakyams*, astrological sheets written in Tamil, supposed to have been compiled by Hindu saints (rishis) thousands of years ago containing the horoscopes of most human beings of the past, present and future. These are enormously popular with Buddhist middle classes and even monks patronize these priests for horoscopic readings. It is also well known that past presidents and prime ministers have consulted astrologers from South India for the timing of most state events and the solution of personal crises and anxieties.

I am not suggesting that these images of Tamils were consistently operative, but some were operative some of the time in the pre-colonial period. Some images, such as Tamils as enemies to be vanquished, must have surfaced during invasions from South India while at other times affinal connections must surely have

been important. One also cannot assume that these diverse images did not imply that Tamils were not seen as "others," because their language and some of their life-ways were in fact not Buddhist and Sinhala. "Otherness" was not a total exclusion but rather a series of identity boundaries that tended to be fuzzier in some periods of history than in others. This can be illustrated during the period of European invasions beginning with the Portuguese in 1505 till the capitulation of the last Sinhala kingdom of Kandy to the British in 1815. During much of this long period the "Otherness" of the Tamils might have appeared in popular texts but rarely as enemies or oppressors of the *sasana*.[88] Instead the new enemies of the *sasana* were the Europeans. With the advent of the colonial period in the 16th century the former identity with its emphasis on the Buddhist over the Sinhala gradually shifted ground to become a more Sinhala-Buddhist one.

## Conclusion

In this paper I try to make a case for the idea of a Buddhist "nation" in colonial and pre-colonial political formations in Sri Lanka. For the most part Sinhalas took for granted that they belonged to the *sasana* of the Buddha; such a stance implied an identity "Buddhist" even though there was no indigenous term designating such an identity. Being Buddhist constituted an "axiomatic" identity based primarily between a fundamental structural opposition between "hunters" or Vaddas who were not Buddhist and Sinhala who were Buddhists for the most part. However, though both those identities had a long historical run, it must be remembered that what is poured into any identity (its substantive content) varied not only historically but also from region to region. Nowadays the Vaddas exist as small, dispossessed groups labeled as "aborigines" by scholars as well as ordinary people. Though I did not deal with it here, my general argument would be that Vaddas gradually became Sinhala-Buddhist when the vast area of the Western, Sabaragamuva, Uva and Kandyan regions were converted into rice



cultivation after the fifteenth century consequent to the emergence of Buddhist states in those areas. Additionally, I demonstrate the further structural opposition between Tamils and Sinhalas that was exacerbated during periods of wars. This oppositional structure was frozen in written historical texts like the *Mahavamsa* and *Pujavaliya* and unfrozen in other ways that I mention in this work. On the popular level people had to contend with immigrants of all sorts from South India and I describe briefly the ways they were *sasanized* and incorporated into the larger cultural order. After the arrival of the European powers it was the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British who were the enemies of the *sasana* for most Sinhalas. But while many Sinhalas became Christians we have only glimpses of Europeans, especially Portuguese, who intermarried with Sinhalas and eventually became Buddhist. This work does not embrace the drastic changes that occurred in the nineteenth century after the capitulation of the last Buddhist kingdom of Kandy in 1815 and the political and social conditions that lead to the resurrection of the Tamils as the threatening Other of the Sinhala-Buddhist imagination.

## Foot notes

1 This paper is excerpted and condensed from a book that I am working on dealing with BUDDHISM, NATIONHOOD AND ETHNICITY IN SRI LANKA. The book itself is based on several articles I have written on this subject especially, "Buddhism, Nationhood and Cultural Identity: A Question of Fundamentals" in *Fundamentals Comprehended*, Vol., 5 of The Fundamentalism Project, edited by Martin E. Marty and R.Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995) pp. 231-56. I have used some of that material in this paper. The reader might wish to ignore the first section dealing with Benedict Anderson's work and focus on pp. 18-63.

2 Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

3 Peter Van Der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

4 John Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

5 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983).

6 Ibid., p. 13

7 Ibid., p. 14

8 Ibid., p. 15

9 Ibid., p. 15, 94

10 Ibid., p. 20

11 Ibid., p. 26.

12 Ibid., p. 30

13 Ibid., p. 31.

14 Ibid., p. 40.

15 Ibid., p. 40, italics mine.

16 Ibid., p. 47

17 Ibid., p. 122.

18 Ibid., p. 43.

19 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 25-29, and also p. 41.

20 For example, see Linda Colley, *Britons*, p. 43: "The image that many Britons nurtured of their land was coloured and made more roseate by their overwhelming Protestantism. And it was on this strong substratum of Protestant bias from below that the British state after 1707 was unapologetically founded."

21 Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976) pp.

22 Ibid., p. 90.

23 Ibid., p. 46.

24 Ibid., p. 77.

25 The idea of "internal colonization" comes from Franz Fanon though I have not been able to check whether the word appears in Fanon's work.

26 Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, p. 95.

27 Ibid., p. 96.

28 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 90.

29 Ibid., p. 95.

30 Ibid., p. 95.

31 Ibid., p. 109.

32 Ibid., p. 116.

33 Ibid., p. 121.

34 Ibid., p. 129.

35 This is my argument with the subaltern critics of Anderson like Partha Chatterjee. They too seem to have bought the Western academic discourse on nationalism in the very process of criticizing it. Thus Chatterjee in his fine work on nationalism discusses the discourses of Bankin, Gandhi and Nehru as exemplifying his three stages — the moment of departure, the moment of maneuver and the moment of arrival. "For nationalist thought to attain its paradigmatic form, these three are necessary ideological moments." My criticism of Chatterjee is that he gives the imprimatur of "nationalism" to the discourses of his three Indian thinkers, whereas neither Bankin nor Gandhi bothered to frame their thoughts in quite this manner. In the context of the times the discourses of all three thinkers could be seen as part of the "independence struggle", "the freedom movement", or "anti-colonialism", or "political resistance" and so forth. Why privilege "nationalism" and then go on to say that Bankin for example is a failed case, albeit expressing the moment of departure? If nationalism is the ideology of the nation state, how much of Gandhi's thought could be considered a national ideology? The most one can say about these discourses is that they attempt to create "forms

of Nationhood", and the creation of such discursive forms is not synonymous with the achievement of an ideology of the nation state. If the nation is to be imagined as a community, and here Anderson is right, then one has to create persons who will take their Indianness for granted, a consciousness of belonging to the nation called India. This sense of Indianness was better understood by Gandhi, than by either Bankin or Nehru. In fact the Indian crowds knew it well when they shouted "mother India" during Nehru's tours; and one jat referred to "the good earth of India". They were all in their respective ways trying to imagine a "nationalism" for India. But imagining a nationalism is not the same a realizing one, as we shall soon see in our discussion of pre-colonial polities in Buddhist societies.

36 Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Renouncer and World Conqueror*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

37 The *Mahavamsa* states that during his first visit the Buddha, on the urging of the god Sumana (now known as Saman), gave some of his hair for enshrinement at this stupa; after the death of the Buddha the collar bone relic (Geiger) or the Adam's apple (Mendis) was enshrined. See Geiger *Mahavamsa*, p. 5 and p. 303, note by G.C. Mendis.

38 *Mahavamsa*, pp. 1-13.

39 Ibid., pp. 51-61.

40 *Kadaim pot* literally means the "books that deal with the limits or borders of a *kadavata*", the latter meaning an entrance to a city or a specified domain.

41 This incantation is as follows in Sinhala:

*Utum budu ruvane*
*Lova desu daham sarane*
*Samaga sanga sarane*
*Sada vandimuva metun sarane.*

42 For details, see Obeyesekere, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini,* pp. 306-312

43 Obeyesekere, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini,* pp. 521-528.

44 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* p. 74.

45 Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans., Joseph Ward Swain, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954) pp.205-234.

46 I draw heavily upon my article, "The Buddhist Pantheon in Ceylon and its Extensions" in Manning Nash, ed., *Anthropological Studies of*



*Theravada Buddhism*, Cultural Report Series, No. 13 (Detroit, Michigan: The Cellar Bookshop,1966 ) pp.1-26. In using the term "obligatory pilgrimage" I was influenced by Gustave E. von Grunebaum's *Muhammedan Festivals*, (New York:Schuman, 1951),pp.15-51.

47 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, pp. 209-219.

48 Wilhelm Geiger, *Culture of Ceylon in Mediaeval Times* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960), p. 207.

49 The "obligatory pilgrimage" also has an important political function in fostering a sense of a larger consciousness in Buddhist societies as it did in Chaucer's England:

And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

It is very likely that these obligatory pilgrimages set the stage for the later development of a more powerful sense of nationhood in Elizabethan England.

50 This is one of the meanings of "church" according to the Oxford English Dictionary and also the sense in which Emile Durkheim used the term in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life.*

51 The pioneer work on *kadaimpot* is by H.A.P. Abeyawardana, *Kadaimpot Vimarsanaya* ("Inquiry into Boundary Books"), (Colombo: Cultural Affairs Ministry, 1978). The author has translated this work into English with the title, *Boundary Divisions of Mediaeval Sri Lanka,* (Polgasovita, Sri Lanka: Academy of Sri Lankan Culture, 1999).

52 The Greeks also had *khorographia* that described the larger universe they were acquainted with or explored, for example, Pomponius Mela and Ptolemy. The Sinhala texts do not go beyond idealized descriptions of the Indian subcontinent or Dambadiva, the Sinhala for Jambudvipa or "the Rose-Apple Land" the classic designation for the subcontinent.

53 Abeyawardana, *Boundary Divisions,* pp. 205-06.

54 By "intermediate texts" I mean those texts that mediate or lie between those of the folk traditions and the more formal chronicles written in Pali.

55 For details of this and other "colonization myths" see my *Cult of the Goddess Pattini,* 361-80.

56 Abeyawardana, *Boundary Divisions,* p. 206.

[57] *Mahavamsa*, ed., Wilhelm Geiger, p. 55. According to the foundation myth, the Buddha entrusted the king of the gods, Sakka to protect his *sasana* in Sri Lanka; and Sakka in turn entrusted this task to Visnu. Sakka is known in Sinhala as Sakra, a transformation of Indra of Hindu mythology.

[58] It is one of the ironies of ethnicity that the Tamils want a separate state of Ilam, which means "Sinhala country"; while the Sinhalas want to hang on to Lanka which is derived from "ilankai" the Tamil word for "island." The etymology of Ilam as Sinkalam is disputed by the historian Peter Schalk.

[59] Cited in John Clifford Holt, *The Buddha in the Crown*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 79.

[60] A detailed account is available in John Holt, *The Buddha and the Crown*, pp. 48-51. For another fascinating account of this myth and a related one, see mid-seventh century text, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, fascile xi entitled, *Simhala*, trans., Li Ronxi (Berkeley: the Numata Center, 1996), pp. 323-33. I have not been able to verify whether the *Simhala Avadana* depicted in the Ajanta caves was also a version of this popular myth.

[61] Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature*, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978, reprint of 1932 edition), p. 382.

[62] For information on the prehistory of Sri Lanka, see S. U. Deraniyagala, *The Prehistory of Sri Lanka*, parts 1 and 2, (Colombo: Archaelogical Survey Memoir, Vol., 8, 1992).

[63] Apropos of Sinhaladvipa it must also be remembered that in the colonial period people in the maritime provinces referred to the remote parts of Uva and Sabaragamuva, as Sinhale. Thus: "I am going to Sinhale" was a familiar expression even in my childhood. I think this too is a variation of the old theme. By this time the resistence to the foreigner was by the people of these areas, and they were thus appropriately designated as Sinhale. In the twentieth century, the term Sinhale had connotations of "old fashioned", "remote", not unlike the European term "primitive".

[64] It should be remembered that though the older *Mahavamsa* and the *Dipavamsa* do not refer to Sinhaladipa, there are occasional references in the later literature, but the popular reemergence of that term in the Kandyan period is exceptional.

[65] O.M. da Silva Cosme, *Fidalgos in the Kingdom of Kotte,* (Colombo: Harwoods Publishers, 1990), p. 78.



[66] da Silva Cosme, pp. 79-80.

[67] Father Fernao de Queyroz, *The Temporal and Sprtiual Conquest of Ceylon*, trans., S.G. Perera (Colombo: Government Printer, 1930), pp. 327-37.
For other references see, Father Queyroz, book 2, p. 262, who says of Mayadunne: "... seeing the King of Cota surrounded by a few Portuguese, Madune and Xaga Raja planned this war on the plea of defending the Law of Buddum, and he Candea especially to avenge the death which Tribule inflicted on his Father and Brothers."

[68] I am not sure how far one can go in interpreting the "myth-model" of Kuveni spinning cotton. It is obviously derived from an Indo-European one circulating in a vast region because the same myth-model is found in *The Odyssey* in the episode of the goddess Calypso. However many women in this epic are presented at the looms whereas this representation of women is unusual in Sinhala history. This floating myth-model is then given contextual specificity in the story of Vijaya.

[69] See Obeyesekere, *The Cult of the Goddess Pattini,* p. 277.

[70] See Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in Standard Edition vol. XV111 (London: The Hogarth Press 1981) p. 69.

[71] Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen, passim;* for the idea of the "work of culture" see Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Work of Culture: Symbolic Transformation in Psychoanalysis and Anthropology,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[72] I knew several of these villages in the Western province in the 1960s; in some the people still had Tamil accents and it is likely that they were recent Tamil speaking settlers.

[73] Given our discussion of axiomatic identities and modes of representing the Tamils, it is difficult to accept the positions taken by several leading scholars regarding the attitude to Tamils in Sri Lankan texts. Thus Tambiah, following an important paper by Gunawardana, thinks that the relations between Sinhalas and Tamils were traditionally harmonious until the changes brought about by colonialism and the imperial conquest. By contrast K.N.O. Dharmadasa looks at another set of historical sources to prove the very contrary. Thus each protagonist brings forward historical evidence to advance the hypothesis he favors against the one he opposes. My position is that "evidence" of this sort is indicative of debates that were going on in the society at large and these debates

could easily have co-existed at any particular time span. Stated in another way, people could have had *both* views of Tamils at any particular time; or in some periods of history one set of views may have dominated over the other. The debates between these scholars provide evidence of debates in the society at large; they cannot be used as "facts" to vindicate one scholarly hypothesis over another. Even today in spite of the virulence of the ethnic conflict, there are a variety of views about Tamils, though the predominant view is that of the hostile other. I do think, however, that Gunawardana is basically correct in arguing against fixing a specific date for the development of a Sinhala-Buddhist identity or giving it a historical fixity.

74 Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus is a complicated one and I refer the reader to his work, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 78-87. Axiomatic identities as they appear in discourse have, to borrow from Max Weber, "immediate intelligibility" to others in the culture.

75 For the benefit of non-Sri Lankan readers let me say that Vesak celebrates the birth and death (final *nirvana*) of the Buddha; it generally occurs in the fullmoon day of the month of Vesak which is May.

76 In many low-country exorcistic rituals, it is necessary to offer a chicken as a *billa* or offering to the demons. In reality this is only a token offering because the chicken is never killed; instead a little bit of blood is taken from it as a substitutive *billa*. In the neighboring village of Gangahenwela, the exorcist consistently killed the chicken as a *billa*, by cutting its neck of and drinking its blood. These practices are not unusual in rituals known as *nica kula tinduva*, roughly translatable as "low caste (or low form of) sorcery".

77 Such situations can easily be multiplied. There are cultural zones where Tamils and Sinhalas met and where intermarriage often took place. One such "intermediate zone" is Panama in the extreme end of the Eastern Province, today sandwiched in the North by Tamil speaking communities and further West by Sinhalas. It is not unusual for a see a member of the same family called Hin Banda (Sinhala) and Subramaniam (Tamil), as a consequence of either Tamil-Sinhala intermarriage or a Sinhala woman marrying a Tamil man on the death of her Sinhala husband.

78 John Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizebethan Writing of England*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 3.



79 Ibid., p. 263.

80 Ibid., p. 277.

81 The Sigiri Graffiti are scribbles on the "mirror wall" of the great mountain fortress, Sigiri, built by the parricide king, Kasyapa (circa 473-491 CE). For an account of these graffiti see Senerat Paranavitana, *Sigiri Graffiti*, vols. 1 and 2, (London: Oxford University Press, 1956); for accounts and translations of Graffiti missed by Paranavitane, see Sita Padmini Gooneratne, H.T. Basnayake and Senake Bandaranayake, "The Sigiri graffiti" in *Sigiriya Project: First Archaeological Excavation and Research Report* (Colombo: Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 1984), pp. 196-98; and an important paper "Sigiri Graffiti: New Readings" in *Further Studies in the Settlement Archaeology of the Sigiri-Dambulla Region* (Colombo: PGIAR Publication, 1994), pp. 199-223).

82 I have translated *dhammadhatu* as "essence-teaching" which is not the conventional meaning of that term. In general *dhammadhatu* is an important technical term having several meanings, the primary one being "element." Nyanatiloka in his *Buddhist Dictionary* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1980) p. 56, translates *dhammadhatu* as "Mind-object-Element." I think the *Pujavaliya* does not use the term in its technical sense but in a more literal sense as "essence teaching."

83 Mayurapada Thera, *Pujavaliya*, edited, Pandit Kirialle Gnanavimala (Colombo: Gunasena and Sons, 1986), p. 746.

84 Ibid., pp. 746-47. These ideas were not invented de novo by the author of the *Pujavaliya* but is derived from the fifth century chronicle, *Dipavamsa,* translated Hermann Oldenberg (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1982), pp. 188-89.

85 The Kandyan rulers from the time of Sri Vijaya Rajasinha till the reign of the last king, Sri Vikrama Rajasinha (1798-1815), were South Indian Nayakkars. See, C.S. Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom 1707-1760* (Colombo: The Lake House Press, 1972 ).

86 For details of this debate see Stanley J. Tambiah, *Buddhism Betrayed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, "The People of the Lion: The Sinhala Identity and Ideology in History and Historiography" in Jonathan Spencer, ed., *Sri Lanka: History and Roots of the Conflict* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 45-85; and K.N.O. Dharmadasa, "'People of the Lion': Ethnic Identity, Ideology, and Historical Revisionism in Contemporary Sri Lanka," *Ethnic Studies*

*Report*, 10, no. 1, (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 1992), pp. 27-59.

87 S. Paranavitana, "The Kotte Kingdom up to 1505," in *The History of Ceylon,* vol., 1, part 2, Colombo: Ceylon University Press, 1960, p. 676.

88 An important exception is that of Rajasinha I of Sitavaka, one of the great Sinhala kings, who became a Saivite and effectively promoted Saivism. In popular histories Tamils associated with him were seen as enemies of the *sasana.*

Printed by Unie Arts (Pvt) Ltd.