

ICES Ethnicity Course Series 3

Identity-Talk, and Tales My Mother Told Me

Lecture delivered by
Regi Siriwardena

at the
Course on Ethnicity, Identity and Conflict
ICES Auditorium, Colombo
August 28, 2002



International Centre for Ethnic Studies
Colombo

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and Tales My Mother Told Me**

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Acknowledgements

The International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES) was established in August 1982 with two offices in Colombo and Kandy. To celebrate its 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 as well as in Sri Lanka as the faculty members.

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Identity-Talk, and Tales My Mother Told Me

Regi Siriwardena

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Professor Michael Roberts's monograph *Modernist Theory*¹ is presented explicitly as a critique of one aspect of Benedict Anderson's enormously influential *Imagined Communities*² - where he argued that nationalism required as a condition the emergence of what Anderson called 'print-capitalism'. Michael (since I am accustomed to address him or refer to him in that way, I shall do so in this essay: to keep saying 'Professor Roberts would be impossibly stiff) doesn't really engage in his 46-page monograph with the Andersonian thesis on nationalism (except in a shadowy way, of which more later). His battle is against the overweightage attached in the Andersonian view to the print-medium, in which he sees a 'Eurocentric' bias that he considers has been transmitted to some writing on Sri Lanka in the wake of Anderson:³

My position is simple. All these approaches underestimate the power of visual and oral modes of communication. They therefore undervalue the capacities of illiterate peoples to think for themselves and communicate their ideas. (p.3)

Michael proceeds to illustrate the flourishing life of these pre-print modes of communication of diverse kinds in pre-modern Sinhala society - oral poetry, both recited and sung; oral storytelling; reading aloud written texts to a collective audience; preaching; conversation in ambalamas; pilgrimages; rituals; temple wall-paintings.

As far as this main thrust of Michael's text is concerned, I have no problems with it. The power and vitality of oral and visual modes

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of communication before the coming of print was a reality not confined to Sri Lankan society: it was common to all rich cultures, eastern or western, Asian or European. How else could these societies have sustained a culture at all, considering the fact that manuscripts were confined to a few copies and reading skills to a small class of (especially monastic) literati?⁴ In both continents the vigorous life of the oral tradition for the mass of the people continued long after printing had come into existence.

But if to assert the strength of the oral-visual tradition in pre-modern Sri Lanka is the burden of the text of Michael's monograph, it has also a sub-text that peeps out, not so much in explicit assertions, as in suggestions, in questions that imply preferred answers, in selectivity of examples - all modes of indirect and impressionistic communication. Reading carefully through the monograph, I notice that, while there is abundant evidence offered for the existence and vigour of oral-visual traditions, there is much less said about the content that was communicated through these forms. Indeed, Michael admits this at the end of the monograph in two revealing passages:

The question remains whether the contemporary ideologues advocating specific world views or collective identities are not, so to speak, re-asserting or re-working ideas espoused by their ancestral generations. Without deciphering the content of their arguments in relation to those of past time one cannot reach even a tentative conclusion.

Within the context of a societal order dominated by the institutions of kingship and the Sangha, did the pilgrimages, rituals and conversations of *the bulk* of the Sinhala-speaking people in those centuries work *deeply* - and thus effectively, albeit slowly - to constitute most of them as Buddhists? And to make them Sinhalese? Since this article did not probe the content of their 'conversations' in depth, these questions are not answered. (*ibid.*, emphasis in original p.35)

I have already characterized these two passages as 'revealing', and what to me is most striking in them is their mode of what I might call 'indirect affirmation' - that is, of stating without appearing to state. In both passages, there is an apparent refusal to come to conclusions in the absence of adequate investigation: 'one cannot reach even a tentative conclusion'; 'these questions are not answered'. Similarly, neither the 'contemporary ideologues' nor their ideologies, in spite of the putative 'specificity' of their world views, are identified. However, every text has a context, and often that context defines meanings that may not be fully spelt out in the words of the text. If the context of the 'visible' part of Michael's text is the publication of Anderson's book and its influence on theorists of Sri Lankan nationalism, I suggest that the context of its less evident sub-text is the publication of R.A.L.H. Gunawardena's 'The People of the Lion'⁵ and the prolonged and often acrimonious controversies it has provoked.⁶ And in that context it becomes possible to identify more specifically the unspecified 'contemporary ideologues' of the first paragraph. The main issue of those controversies was the question whether contemporary Sinhala nationalism was a construction of colonial times or an inheritance from an immemorial tradition. On the one hand there were the 'ideologues' who pointed to the *Mahavamsa* and other chronicles and literary texts as evidence confirming the latter position. Against them, we have had theorists of the opposing camp saying: 'But those texts can only give you the ideas that the kings and the court and the monastic elite wanted to promote? How can you assume that the common people thought the same way?' Now comes Michael to point to the oral-visual tradition as the source from which we can discover what the common people thought and felt. Of course, he doesn't claim to be able to tell you what can be discovered there because he hasn't done the necessary work, and even in relation to what he says in the monograph he makes this acknowledgement:

Given shortcomings in my expertise relating to this period and its literature, I have relied heavily not only on secondary sources but on extended conversations with

historians and literary specialists familiar with the literary and oral traditions pertaining to the middle period.⁷

A list of fourteen people follows. Such frankness is admirable. But how far is it reconcilable with the fact that, even while declaring that he doesn't know the answers, Michael poses the questions in such a way as to convey that he knows what the answers should be? If we examine again the two passages I have quoted from p. 35, the opening sentence of the first is cast in a form that my old teacher of grammar would have categorised as 'a sentence expecting the answer "yes"', while in the second passage the reference to the dominance of kingship and the Sangha and the emphasis on *deeply* point to a conclusion, not asserted but implied, that the common people could not but have replicated the fundamental identities of their social and political betters.

This impression is further confirmed by the few examples of particular communicational content from the oral tradition that Michael offers us in the monograph. While re-iterating that he isn't equipped to pronounce on content, he yet offers us these examples which are all tilted in one direction: they seem to show that what the oral tradition disseminated was essentially the same ideology as the literate tradition - for instance, through stories of the deeds of heroic or munificent kings. Michael does concede in one place:

The importance of oral and visual means of cultural exchange in a context of a relatively uniform language does not mean that Sinhala-speakers, and those becoming Sinhala, thought as one. Apart from differences in emphasis arising from class and caste distinctions, one would expect regional variations in story line. This is a major issue for scholars to address. (p.27)

But welcome as this qualification is, this is the only place in the monograph where Michael refers to class or caste or region as possible sources of difference. This is all the more disappointing because Michael was one of the first Sri Lankan scholars to break the taboo on serious investigation of caste in what remains a path-breaking study.⁸

Reading Michael's monograph, I am strengthened in the view I had already formed that identity-talk, whether by politicians or scholars, acts like a steamroller: it obliterates the diversity of the actual relations in which people - whether individuals or communities - live, reducing them to an imposed homogeneity. It has to be asked whether this is any less crushing and any less depreciating than the assumption against which Michael inveighs in his monograph - that illiterate people before the coming of print couldn't think for themselves or communicate their ideas. Of what good is it to uphold their capacity to do these things if at the same time we are saying that the ideas they could think or communicate were essentially those transmitted to them from kings or monks?

At the end of the first and main part of the monograph, Michael offers us this summing-up:

In broad overview, then, we can say that pilgrimages, *pirit*, *kavikara maduvas*, *kobomba kankariyas* and other ritual gatherings, as well as moments of evocative storytelling or casual expressions of *gi* and *kavi*, were some of the embodying practices through which Sinhala-ness as well as Buddhist-ness came into being. Or, to phrase it differently, these are the modalities that enabled Sinhala-ness as well as Buddhist-ness to become embodied. (p. 24)

It will be noted that these two sentences are not questions but assertions, and assertions that do not carry the tentativeness that hedges some of the other generalizations about content in the monograph. But 'Sinhala-ness' and 'Buddhist-ness', across the multiform oral tradition covering many localities and over the six centuries of time Michael is surveying, weren't unchanging and monolithic unities. There were (and still are) several different ways of being Sinhala and of being Buddhist. There have been people in the Wannu, in Negombo, Chilaw and elsewhere who lived out their entire lives without bothering to define whether they were ethnically or linguistically Sinhala or Tamil.⁹ Nor did 'Buddhist-ness' prevent popular religion from developing what Gananath Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich call 'syncretism' and

Jonathan Walters prefers to term 'multireligion'.¹⁰ Whichever term we use, the reality was that of a coming together of three currents of religious worldviews and practice - those of Theravada Buddhism, 'Hinduism' (itself a colonially invented term for a multitude of sects and observances), and home-grown cults of gods and demons (indeed, the openness of Buddhism and its freedom, traditionally, from imposed authoritarian uniformity, have been among its most attractive features). Even after the crushing pressures of over a century of political mobilisation of ethnonationalism, half a century of strident ethnic conflict and two decades of war, these commonalities are not entirely dead. To rediscover them may help in putting together the fragments of the nation.

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I agree with Michael that the oral-visual tradition should be explored in depth - or what is left of it, because every year its survivals have been eroded by formal education, modern media, urbanization and the rise of modern 'democratic' politics. Still, what survives in records and memories should be garnered and examined, but the effort will be futile if we start by assuming that we already know what we can find there, because then that is all we shall find.

I am, if anything, as removed by my education and academic training from the oral tradition as Michael is, and I am not even like him, a trained anthropologist. I have, however, one advantage over him: I knew intimately one person whose mind had been shaped by the oral-visual culture. That was my mother.

My mother was born in the last decade of the nineteenth century in a village in the Gampaha district, where she lived until she was married and migrated to Colombo and its suburbs. Her only language, to the end of her days, was Sinhala, and in this too she had no formal education. Her childhood preceded by several decades the great expansion of school education in rural areas that followed universal suffrage and free education, and who then in a peasant family would have thought it necessary to educate a girl-child? After marriage my mother learnt to write her name in English - no doubt on the

instruction of my father who had an education in English and was a government clerk. When, after my father's death, she went monthly to draw her widow's pension of Rs. 74.99 (on which, for a time, she fed and clothed five people), I used to watch her writing laboriously 'S.A. Babanona Hamine' in a big sprawling hand.

I have said that there are different ways of being Buddhist, and my mother's Buddhism was less ritualistic than ethical - not in an abstract philosophical way but in the sense of being expressed in the moral norms of daily living. She had several great sorrows in her life, but these didn't turn her into a *pinkam*-haunting *upasika*-amma, because she had resources of inner strength that enabled her to survive.

I think my mother was the first creative artist in language I encountered, though it is only belatedly that I have come to appreciate this fact. Because of her lack of education, her creativity could express itself only in her storytelling and her conversation - especially in the extraordinary originality and wit of the private nicknames she bestowed on everybody in the neighbourhood, and to each of whom she would refer in the family circle by no other name. There was, for instance, a *vedamahattaya* nearby who was a well-known toper on toddy: she called him *thaniakurab*. This is really untranslatable into English: the best I can do is 'single-letter fellow', because *ra* (toddy) is a single character in Sinhala. Knowing now the stresses and strains of my mother's life, I guess that her wit was a source of emotional catharsis, even while it maintained the linguistic fertility of speakers in a pre-print culture.

When I was four and five years old, my mother used to tell me bedtime stories. These weren't, of course, about Little Red Riding Hood or Jack and the Beanstalk, of whom she had never heard: they were village folk-tales that no doubt had been told her by her elders. Although I enjoyed the stories, I couldn't at that time realise the value of the treasures she was unfolding before me, and soon - under the combined influence of my father, who taught me to read English, schooling and the environment of a colonial society - I began to read Grimm and Andersen and grew away from my mother's stories. By the time I started schooling, in a class of proper middle-class children in a suburban English-medium school, it was a shameful secret that I had a mother who couldn't speak English.¹¹

Now, when I try to remember my mother's stories, disconnected sentences float up in my memory: ... *itbin yanakota yanakota, maha russa gabak thiyana*... 'So after going and going, there was an enormous tall tree', but who the traveller was and what the tree signified I have forgotten, though I can still recall, across seventy-five years, the sense of awe I felt on hearing that sentence.

But what I am certain of is that my mother never told me stories of kings, or of battles, or even *jataka* or other religious stories, either because these were not what she was interested in narrating or because she didn't think this was what would interest me: her stories were all of the marvellous or of the comic. There are only two stories that I can now specifically recall, and these too, alas, in fragments. One was a story about Hava and Nariya (Hare and Jackal): many years later I came across a version of this in a printed book of children's stories, but there it had been sanitised and made respectable. My mother's version was a piece of earthy, even scatological, village humour.

The other story, which is more directly relevant to the subject of this essay, was about an Appuhamy who went on a journey, taking with him a servant. As the name of the former indicates, he was of the superior *goigama* caste, and affluent enough to afford a retainer. The latter was in the story a man of the *batgama* caste, very low in the caste hierarchy, some of whose traditional functions were to act as household servants and carriers of baggage for the higher caste. There is a popular name for this caste, and this is now, rightly, regarded as demeaning; this, complete with its derogatory suffix, is what my mother used in narrating the story,

But what is striking in the story is that, throughout, the Appuhamy is characterised as stupid, feckless and cowardly, while it is his servant - the man of low caste - who is the hero, ingenious, resourceful and brave. On the first lap of the journey, at midday, the Appuhamy discovers that he has forgotten to bring any food, so he asks the other to give him a share of his *bathmula*, his bundle of rice. Of course, this is breaking the caste taboos, so the Appuhamy strictly enjoins him not to blab when they get back home. This leads to a series of situations in the course of the story in which the servant blackmails the Appuhamy who prohibits him to do this or that: '*ebenan*

mama ara vittiya kiyana', 'then I'll talk about that happening', and the Appuhamy has to give in.

The climax of the story is that when night falls, the pair have to find lodgings, and they knock at the door of a house where a kindhearted woman offers to put them up in the *atuva* above the hearth provided they stay mum because her husband won't like it if he discovers their presence. It turns out that the husband is a *rakshasaya* (demon) or *rassaya*, in my mother's rural speech. There is a near-disaster because even in this situation of extreme peril the Appuhamy can't contain himself, and insists, first on pissing, and then on shitting, from his perch. Not surprisingly, the *rassaya* smells out the hidden pair, though he can't see them, and threatens to eat them up. But the servant is equal to the occasion. He calls out, '*mama thamai rassayan kana barassaya*' (I am the *barassaya* who eats *rassayas*), and succeeds in intimidating and outwitting the *rassaya*.

When one reflects on it, it becomes clear that this is an extraordinary story to have been disseminated in a *goigama*-caste community. Not only is the upper-caste Appuhamy ridiculed throughout, and the low-caste servant raised to heroic stature, but the story even mocks the caste taboos: when the Appuhamy is hungry, he doesn't mind breaking them although he tries to keep the breach a secret. My mother wasn't trying to instill in me modern liberal or radical ideas about the caste system, and in any case the story wasn't her creation but that of the community. (My sister heard the same story a few years later from my aunt, my mother's sister, so it must have been one they had both grown up with.)

How can one explain an anti-upper-caste story being told in a community of upper-caste peasants? My mother's family, as far as I can determine, were middle-level cultivators, neither rich nor very poor. I think what happens in the story is that the class antagonism of this group towards the Appuhamys above them wins out over caste stratification and caste loyalty. This should be unsettling to those who think there were no class oppositions in the traditional village, or that there was a one-to-one correspondence between caste and class relations. What the story brings out is a contradiction between these two forms of hierarchy. But what it also reveals is the ability of peasant story-tellers in the oral tradition to 'think for themselves' and

find a voice of their own. If they were able to situate themselves independently in imagination in relation to caste and class, why suppose that in other respects they were the passive transmitters of values handed down from above by kings, nobles and monks?

There are other areas of the oral tradition that also challenge established caste hierarchies that have been little explored by scholars. In 1988 Nireka Weeratunge produced a remarkable study related to the most marginalized of Sinhala castes, the Rodi - the only Sinhala caste that has in fact been stigmatized as 'untouchable'. The study has recently been reprinted by ICES.¹² Nireka is very modest about the study, describing it as only 'a survey of sorts' because it was carried out primarily in one village over a few months. But the recovery in the book of the oral traditions of the community are illuminating and fascinating. Not only does her research point to the likelihood that the Rodi were originally a separate ethnic group with their own language and religion, who were later incorporated into Sinhala society by being assigned the lowest place: the evidence in the study of the way in which their myth of origin is told and re-told by speakers of different generations shows how the myth serves sometimes as a reconciliatory mechanism explaining and inducing acceptance of their marginalised condition, sometimes as a compensatory element by evoking the memory of a different past, and sometimes as a critique of the values of the outside society and, therefore, implicitly of the caste structure itself. Reading this study, I am impelled to speculate on the neglected material that may still be unexplored in the oral traditions of other castes as well as of regional communities that await the enterprise of a new generation of scholars without crippling pre-conceptions.

Reference:

1. Michael Roberts, *Modernist Theory. Trimming the Printed Word: The Instance of Pre-modern Sinhala Society* (Colombo: ICES, 2002).
2. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

- 3 He specifically mentions Jonathan Spencer's *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble* (Roberts 2002, p. 3).
- 4 I don't wish to deal at any length here with the European case, so I will confine myself to one instance. Most people take for granted that the highest achievement of European culture was in the plays of Shakespeare. But Shakespeare wasn't a 'book': his plays were created in and for the oral and visual medium of the theatre, where a good part of the audience couldn't read anyway; and all the relevant evidence suggests that Shakespeare took no interest at all in the publication of his plays.
- 5 R.A.L.H. Gunawardena, 'The People of the Lion: the Sinhala Identity in History and Historiography' in, *Ethnicity and Social Change* (Colombo: SSA, 1985).
- 6 I should like to make it clear that I am not referring here to the more narrowly focussed debate between Professors R.A.L.H. Gunawardena and K.N.O. Dharmadasa on the time when the general body of the Sinhala people, as distinct from the ruling elite, came to think of themselves as 'Sinhala' (10th century, 13th century, or whenever). I add this because Professor Dharmadasa once referred in print to a non-existent essay or essays I had written on this question - something I shouldn't have dreamt of doing because I had neither the linguistic nor the historical knowledge needed to express an opinion on it, nor indeed was I interested in that issue. In spite of his attention being drawn to it, Professor Dharmadasa didn't acknowledge his error.
- 7 The middle period is defined as 'the long span of time extending from the Dambadeniya period to the Kandyan period, from 1232-1815'. (Roberts 2002, p. 6)
- 8 Michael Roberts, *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation: the Rise of a Karava Elite in Sri Lanka, 1500-1931* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- 9 Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, 'Identity on the Borderline: Modernity, New Ethnicities, and the Unmaking of Multiculturalism in Sri Lanka', ed. in Neluka Silva, *The Hybrid Island* (Colombo: SSA, 2002).
- 10 Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988); Jonathan S. Walters,

'Multireligion on the Bus: Beyond 'Influence' and: 'Syncretism' in the Study of Religious Meetings, in eds. Pradeep Jeganathan and Quadri Ismail), *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka* (Colombo: SSA, 1995).

- 11 My poem 'Colonial Cameo' recalls a dramatic and painful moment when the secret was bared.
- 12 Nireka Weeratunge, *Aspects of Ethnicity and Gender among the Rodi of Sri Lanka* (Colombo: ICES, 2002).

