MODERNIST THEORY

Trimming the Printed word:
The Instance of Pre-modern Sinhala Society

Michael Roberts

COVER PICTURE

Panāvitiya *ambalama*

Source: Studio Times, a contemporary picture by Nihal Fernando. Panāvitiya is near Kurunägala. Fernando's notes record that the shelter is mounted on a stone platform and that the pillars are exquisitely carved in a style similar to Embekke. This *ambalama* was restored in 1961 by the Department of Archaeology. While the thatched roof was replaced by tiles, an attempt seems to have been made to retain the original architectural form and the style of the wooden pillars and their carvings. For a detailed description with analytical etchings, see R. Dassanayake, *Amabalama saha samājaya*, Colombo: 2000, pp. 115-24.

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The word "media" connotes a great deal today: It suggests a powerful force, a pervasive influence, a job market and much more. These connotations mark the technological force of the television set and the computer in the contemporary global order. Among academics in the 1950s and 1960s, a similar power was attributed to the written word, that is, to the word in print form (as distinct from palm-leaf). Both phenomena can be treated as signs of modernism. In the 1950s and 1960s this imprint of modernism within the social sciences was embodied in "modernisation theory." This theory was one of the ruling models in social science literature and was rooted in the distinctions between "modernity" and "tradition," and the related differentiation between "modern societies" (invariably Western) and underdeveloped "traditional societies."[1] In questioning the rigidity of this distinction in their book *The Modernity of Tradition* (Chicago: 1967) with reference to South Asia, the Rudolphs implicitly emphasised the force of such forms of conceptualisation.

An important exponent of this style of reasoning was the political scientist, Karl W Deutsch (1961 and 1966). Extending communication theory to the study of nationalism, Deutsch linked the concept of "social mobilisation" to the dichotomy between the modern and the traditional. He developed his argument through case material from Europe. In this view urbanisation and industrialisation were critical modernising forces in the world order of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, agricultural societies were represented as stagnant backwaters with a population (significantly called an "underlying population") who had not been subject to intensive communication or mobilisation.

By the 1980s modernisation theory had quietly died away and survived only in little academic ghettoes. But since then Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983 & 1991) has re-inserted an emphasis on the

[1] For convenient introductions to this literature, see Bendix 1967 and Tipps 1973.

force of modern communication through attention to print technology and print-as-commodity. Unlike Deutsch, Anderson emerged from a background in Marxist circles.[2] Not only is his prose more captivating and lucid than that of Deutsch, but his approach is less cybernetic and far more imaginative. In stressing the importance of print technology he links the process to the decline of "sacral cultures" as well as the conceptual revolution in "apprehensions of time" that enabled people to read or hear similar messages more or less simultaneously through the media of newspapers or television. Indeed, one could say that Anderson is not only more attuned to cultural practices than Deutsch, but also represents recent intellectual currents that have moderated Marxist materialism by attending to the world of meaning. For this reason it is best to depict the Andersonian school of thought as "modernist" in distinction from "modernisation theory."

It is nevertheless quite striking, as Rothermund has noted (1997), that Anderson makes no reference at all to Deutsch's work. Perhaps a considered distancing act of omission? Indeed, one could say that he carefully abjures the use of the word "modernisation." Yet, in my view, his book can be read as a resurrection of a technological modernist emphasis with a critical, and valid, link to the commodity forms of the capitalist and imperialist order.

Though Anderson introduces a useful innovation by highlighting the manner in which the creole communities of Latin America emerged as proto-nations or nations before, or in parallel with, the nationalist transformations of Europe, his basic model remains Eurocentric. It is through attention to the decline of Latin as the language of learned communication and the growth of increasingly standardised vernacular literatures in Europe that he argues that "the development of print-as-commodity" generated "a new way of linking fraternity, power and time meaningfully together" (1983: 40-41).

Since his book burst upon the academic scene, Anderson's catchy title and its associated argument have become a master text. It has gained in force through its merger with the intellectual currents associated with Edward Said and Michel Foucault. In studies of South Asia these influences have led to a proliferation of works delineating the impact of the intellectual frameworks

[2] In fact, he commences by inquiring how states with impeccable Marxist credentials could go to war with each other; and by quoting Hobsbawm and Nairn as preliminaries to the assertion that "nationalism has proved an uncomfortable *anomaly* for Marxist theory" (Anderson 1983: 11-13, emphasis his).

of Orientalism under the aegis of the British Empire.[3] These trends have been extended to Sri Lankan history by such works as Jonathan Spencer's *A Sinhala Village in a Time of Trouble* (1990), where Anderson rubs shoulders with Gellner and Hobsbawm as a critical inspiration.[4]

These emphases, in their turn, have meshed with pre-existing tendencies in the academic world of Sri Lanka. Nurtured in the empiricist traditions of British scholarship, Sri Lanka historians and literary scholars have tended to rely on the written word for most, if not all, their source material. **It is against this overweightage that my article is directed.** 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.** They also undervalue the ability of pre-modern states and illiterate peoples to assemble for action when spurred by millenarian messages or external threats.[5]

In pressing this argument I am reiterating a previous thesis: writing in the 1970s I criticised Deutsch for submerging the qualitative world of value under "the statistical weight" (his words) of information. I insisted that "even an illiterate rural population residing in a country blessed with poor communications could evolve a sense of community."[6] I return to this theme here because the revived forms of modernism would seem to be holding sway in the corridors of academia. Thus, in a recent review of historical consciousness among the Sinhalese Jack D. Eller has this to say: "After all, the texts upon which this [Sinhalese] memory was based were monkish and not popular ones before the eighteenth century or so, which means that ...

[3] For instance, Inden 1990; Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993; Ludden 1996. For a review embracing Sri Lanka and India, see Rogers 1994.

[4] For a critical review, see Roberts 1993.

[5] See Roberts 1979: 22-27 for early elaborations of this critique. Among the many texts that provide ample demonstrations of the capacity of illiterate underclasses and peoples to mobilise for collective action, see Tilly 1976; Guha 1983 and Ileto 1979. Nor can one study the Mexican "revolution" of 1911-and-beyond without attending to the *corridos* or balladic traditions.

[6] Roberts 1979: 24-27, quotation from 25. Earlier Paul Brass had argued that it could not "be assumed that the underlying pre-mobilized population lack[ed] social and political consciousness" (1974: 422). His work, nevertheless, is an application of Deutsch's theories to modern India with significant amendments (see pp. 22-24, 44). As such it does not weight oral communications adequately (Roberts 1979: 22-27).

the texts themselves were not thoroughly known to the masses nor even to all *bhikkhus*."[7] This is a serious error. It is an error that stems from arrogance as much as ignorance. It is also a conventional error rooted in the occupational culture of academics prone to overvalue the power of the printed word because their trade is embedded in the printed text.

Even an experienced historian like Hobsbawm, a scholar who worked on *Primitive Rebels* and one who is aware of the importance of ballads in mobilising sentiment, tends to fall foul of this modernist bias when he turns his attention to nationalism and its antecedents. He contends that "in the era before general primary education there ... could be no spoken 'national' language except such literary or administrative idioms as were written, or ... adapted for oral use, either as a lingua franca, or ... to address popular audiences across dialectical boundaries, e. g. for preachers or the reciters of songs and poems common to a wider cultural area" (1990: 52). He also assumes that the sharp dialect differences found in pre-modern Europe and China prevailed throughout the world among other language 'communities' and believes that it was only the literate elites who had a wide reach within such pre-capitalist societies. Though his empirical surveys do introduce a few qualifications and refer to peoples who seem to have constituted speech communities across a substantial area, he follows Anderson in emphasising a sharp temporal rupture between "proto-nationalism" and modern forms of the nation.[8]

In questioning these lines of emphasis in this article I am in effect placing myself alongside those who have recently challenged Anderson *et al* in qualified ways. In imaginatively demonstrating how modern technologies transformed visual representations in India from the late nineteenth century, Christopher Pinney, for instance, highlights "the complex tradition of images which prefigure the commoditised propaganda of today" (1997: 836). While endorsing Anderson's argument that print capitalism has had a central role "in the construction of public spaces and arenas of consciousness that are intimately linked to nationalism," Pinney demonstrates that the "messianic time" associated with pre-modern, sacred orders of society has not withered away in the modernising India of the 1880s-and-beyond. In the "popular

[7] Eller 1999: 109, emphasis mine. Eller is not a Sri Lankan specialist. In part his problem arises from a reliance on works by David Little and Satchi Ponnambalam, two shoddy books that should never be in anyone's bibliography.

[8] Hobsbawm 1990: chap. 2. But note his references to the Magyars, Albanians, Serbs, and the English of Tudor times (1990: 70, 75, 76). Also see Bayly 1998: 20-21, 101.

Indian domain, time was messianic, scripts had indexical and nonarbitrary power, and kings were – in many cases – at the centre of the moral and ritual universe." Thus, he contends that in contemporary India "popular Indian conceptions of language are still firmly pre-Saussurean, and scripts are to be found exerting a powerful effect everywhere" (1997: 850, 851). In a different vein Gautam Ghosh has suggested that "powerful identities founded on longer histories and more intimate practices" than those emphasised by Anderson have been at work in shaping nationalism. He illustrates the latter process through the worshipping practices of contemporary Bengali *bhadralok*. Their "emotionally loaded understanding of the passage of time in relation to family deities" mediated and enabled their affiliation with Indian nationalism and the Indian nation state (1998b: 35, 37).

In step with a band of scholarship that is trimming Anderson's sails, then, my article is an ethnographic illustration of the force of oral traditions. It pursues this goal by focusing on a pre-capitalist setting, the Sinhala-speaking society prior to the British conquest of the whole island of Ceylon (Sri Lankā) in 1815. However, this historical engagement is associated with a methodological tack that literary historians of Lanka have been loath to utilise. Taking my cue from the type of work that Gananath Obeyesekere has pursued (1987 and 1989), I insist that an awareness of the processes of oral transmission in contemporary Lanka and a grasp of the contemporary vitality of folk tales relating to the immediate pre-British period is of material benefit to historical research.

In working on the nationalist agitations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it became evident to me that street preaching was one mode of communication favoured by nationalist activists and temperance workers. For instance, such methods were adopted by Buddhist activists in order to combat the Christian preachers who used street preaching in their evangelical work. Again, as the tension against the Mohammedan Moors built up in early 1915 after a Supreme Court decision on the Gampola Perahära case in March 1915, a Sinhalese street preacher is said to have been indulging in "scurrilous" and "offensive" diatribes against the Moors among the pilgrims in the Adam's Peak locality.[9] To those Sri Lankans who have lived through the general election of 1956 as well as political agitations of that era the political impact of *kavi kola* (broadsides in verse) and *kälä patra*

[9] "Report on the Riots in Ratnapura district," by R N Thaine, 8 Sept. 1915 in *Eastern 128*, being Colonial Office 882/10/128. Regarding street preaching in this era, see Dharmapala's diary entries, 26 Dec. 1889, 21 Feb. 1898 and 26 Jan. 1902.

(scurrilous broadsides) would be only too familiar. These were printed broadsides to be sure, but they derived their inspiration and effectiveness from a long tradition of oral tales on similar lines diffused by word of mouth. It is my surmise that for every printed leaflet in the 1950s and 1960s there were many more scurrilous ditties and stories being circulated along oral channels.

Market places, periodic fairs (*pola*), festive gatherings, bus stands and road junctions have been among the favourite sites for such verbal performances. In the 1950s there was a large tree at the north eastern end of the Galle Esplanade which provided the shade and the space for vendors, astrologers and soap-box orators to ply their trade for many a decade. It was quite pithily and appropriately known as the *pacha gahā*, the tree where one hears lies or tall tales. Here, then, in this naming act was a popular recognition that this was a kind of institution, a cultural practice that was in tune with one's society. Here, then, was recognition of the force of storytelling and gossipy slander in Sinhala society.

Such contemporary scenarios provide one with a faint glimpse of the strength of storytelling in Sinhala society in the period prior to the capitalist and bureaucratic transformations of the British colonial era. My focus encompasses the long span of time extending from the Dambadeniya period to the Kandyan period, from 1232-1815. As convenient shorthand I call this the "middle period." Within these temporal parameters, however, most of my material will be drawn from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries and focus on the Kingdom of Kandy (more correctly *Sihalē* or *Sinhalē*) in particular.

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. Let me record here my indebtedness to Sandadas and Sandagomi Coperahewa, C R de Silva, K N O Dharmadasa, Lorna Dewaraja, K B A Edmund, Srinath Ganewatte, Darshani Gunatilake, D S Mayadunne, P B Meegaskumbura, Rohini Paranavitana, S J Sumanasekera Banda, Ananda Tissa Kumara and D P M Weerakkody.[10] The soundings and translations they provided have been neatly complemented by extended conversations with Ananda

[10] While these individuals provide my work with a measure of authority, they should not be held responsible for errors arising from the manner in which I have assembled the data and arguments.

Wakkumbura, who brought to the subject not only an acute imagination, but also an extensive knowledge of contemporary Sinhala culture at the grass roots nourished through extensive work as a radical activist.

Wakkumbura's credentials underline the degree to which information gleaned from mid-twentieth century practices have provided me with insights into the processes of oral dialogue and transmission that would have prevailed in the bygone era of the Kandyan period. Here my surmise is that several of these practices in rural localities and outlying backwaters, though fast declining today, had prevailed for many centuries. Wakkumbura brought my attention to an old storyteller who happened to be illiterate, but was a mine of folklore on such figures as Rājasinha II of Kandy (1636-87). He also noted that, in the middle decades of this century when he was growing up, there were three "plebian" *kavikārayās* (poets) in his home village of Demalapōruva near Karangoda in Sabaragamuva who used to entertain households in the course of their itinerant trading journeys. Likewise, Meegaskumbura recalls that, in his natal village in the depths of Kotmale district in the Central Highlands, at night on occasions "those days" one would suddenly hear a burst of drumming from a house with a poem chanted aloud as accompaniment or follow-up. Such invitations then drew drumming and chant responses from some other household.

Those historians of Sri Lanka who have received conventional academic credentials have been reluctant to use the information derived from such sources. If the quest is for empirical data, such caution may have justification. But my interest is in the modalities of communication and the perspectives encoded within the poetic and narrative tales retailed in this fashion. Besides the work of Obeyesekere, one notes how Kapferer has insisted that the lineages of *yakäduro* (specialist practitioners of "exorcisms" or *yaktovil*) from Beravā households in the Southern Province with whom he was familiar were a "major storehouse of Sinhalese cultural knowledge" (1983: 9). In other words, they should be regarded as peoples' historians. Their day-to-day work, moreover, combine (combined) body marks, masks, dress, movement, talk and other sounds in delivering messages. Such combinations, of course, have had a long history in the Indian subcontinent. They point up the importance of participatory rites and the visual in the transmission of significant messages.[11] In other words I attach importance to the relations

[11] Van der Veer's chapter on "Ritual Communication" (1994: chap. 3) should be mandatory reading for all historians of India and Sri Lanka. I also profited from a seminar at Adelaide presented by Christopher Pinney detailing the worshipping practices of villagers in Central India.

and ideas encoded within kinesic practices, that is, body language, as well as the symbolism embodied in body marks, sartorial and tonsorial practices and the sculptural, pictorial and scriptural images that are part of ritual action.[12]

Visual Modes of Communication

Duncan's imaginative reading (1990) of the architectural and decorative topography of the city of Kandy (that is Senkadagala or Mahānuvara) and Holt's use of sculptures and paintings to supplement written texts and folklore in his reading of the Avalokitesvara/Nātha cult in the hill regions of Lanka (1991) as well as his work on visual liturgies in the Kandyan region (1996) reveal how visual material can be so fruitful in our explorations of past practices and modes of thought. My point here is the same as that conveyed by Duncan and Holt: these artefacts formed an 'everyday' form of communication. At their initial moment of expression they conveyed meaning to those contemporaries who were attentive to their (sometimes polysemic) messages. And they had the capacity to convey meaning, perhaps with changes of inflection, to the generations that followed.

The wall paintings in Buddhist temples are particularly significant in this regard. They would have been part of the regular compass of a large segment of the population. It is not alleged that every visitor to a shrine room consciously reflected on all the paintings or iconic artefacts they saw in the course of their visit. My suggestion is that there would be an unreflective absorption of a great deal in ways that had the potential to link up with more reflective moments. In this view the shreds, patches and threads of a tale on the wall would crystallise on subsequent occasions when it was rendered vivid by an event or by an act of textual reading. The power of communication lies in the intertextual and intermedial crosshatching of messages.

The messages on temple wall paintings, I emphasise, were/are not 'merely' religious. Indeed, in the Lankan context the sharp distinction between the religious and the political that is so central to secular intellectual traditions is quite misleading.[13] The wall paintings convey notions of kingship, they remind Sinhalese people of beneficial rites of world renewal or merit-earning acts of munificence by specific kings. They embody the

[12] See Roberts 2000 and 1996.

[13] See Roberts 1994: chaps. 1, 3 and 6.

concept of a powerful figure who is *pirivarāgena*, that is, surrounded by acolytes and followers who mark his status/power (the male-gendered form here being reflective of the patriarchal patterning of most such representations). Illustrations of the political meanings encoded and imbricated within tales crowding temple walls could be multiplied.

For my exemplary elaboration of the religio-political meanings conveyed by temple wall paintings I lean on John Holt's recent analysis of the "visual liturgy" in the paintings effected under the auspices of the Kandyan kings in the eighteenth century. By "visual liturgy" Holt refers to "the articulation of a consciously contrived and coordinated set of symbolic tropes designed to encapsulate and engender meaningful religious experiences ... in an engaging ... setting" (1996: 52). This is an erudite but difficult conceptualisation. It's import in Holt's understanding is fleshed out by his previous statement that for a devotee to enter a Buddhist temple is to enter into "a genuinely *situating* experience, where one identifies with past and continuing expressions of the Buddhist world view" (1996: 42, his emphasis).

Central to virtually all the Kandyan wall paintings that Holt has studied is a depiction of the *solosmastāna*, or sixteen sacred places reputedly visited by the Buddha when he consecrated, and thus conquered, the island according to the account in the fifth-century *Mahāvamsa*. In every instance the series of wall paintings follow the sequence mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa*, thereby recalling the latter's argument that "the true kingship of [the] island ... has been dedicated to the Buddha" so that kings who abide by this project would gain future Buddhahood as *bodhisattvas*.[14] The temples also had pictures of other meaningful moments in Buddha's life, but the series of paintings that Kīrti Srī Rājasinha sponsored at the Dambulla cave temple during the mid-eighteenth century was especially elaborate. Here, the "telescopic effect" found in most temple paintings has been magnified. Among the moments encoded in this series were (are) "the *Mahāvamsa*'s story of King Vijaya and the arrival of the prototypical Sinhalese from North India; the ... beginnings of Buddhism in Anuradhapura; and King Dutthagāmini's epic victory over the Tamil Elāra" (1996: 70). In entering the cave shrine rooms bearing these paintings "the consequence [for the faithful] is an awareness of the Buddha's cosmic presence or the cosmic reality he symbolizes ad infinitum .... The *solosmastāna* and the more detailed depictions ... link this truth directly to the vicissitudes of historical perceptions of Sinhalese

[14] Holt 1996: 60. Also Bandaranayake 1966: 153-60.

Buddhist kingship and civilization in Sri Lanka" (1996: 71). In other words, one cannot understand the political order of the Kingdom of Kandy (1590s-1815) without taking note of the sculptures, paintings and other artwork during that era.

The Oral and the Aural

The significance of visual media having been acknowledged, my essay seeks to assemble pertinent details in order to illustrate **the force of oral modes of communication during the middle period.** This emphasis should not be read in either:or terms. I am not trying to deny the influence of prose and poetry penned on *ola*-leaf (palm-leaf) manuscripts. As in many societies, the written, oral and visual complemented each other.[15] Indeed, in acts of listening-reading, as we shall see, the written and oral literally worked hand-in-glove (below: 000). It is also likely that a number of texts that people encountered in the past (and which we today read as literary) originated as oral sermons or stories. Sirima Kiribamune (personal communication, June 1999) indicated that several of the Buddhist commentaries, or segments thereof, probably had their inception as sermons or verbal exegeses at religious functions such as *bana* or *sil* at temples. Likewise, on the basis of their intimate acquaintance with palm-leaf manuscripts, Young and Senanayaka note that some forms of literature "emerged from a corpus of oral traditions" (1999: 7).

The content and composition of the various versions of the *Rājāvaliya* (the standard version being dated to the turn of the eighteenth century[16]) also indicate that a number of folk legends have been inserted into this palm-leaf manuscript amidst tales drawn from the *vamsa* traditions. These *vamsa* stories

[15] The "interaction between the oral and written forms is extremely common" and there is, for instance, "continual interchange" between street ballads and popular literature (Finnegan 1977: 160, 162).

[16] It should be stressed that "there is no definite single work by [the] name [*Rājāvaliya*], but several works..." (Kulasuriya 1978: 19). However, the version edited by Gunasekara and Suraweera in English and Sinhala respectively is now the conventional version.

Some versions are histories of districts and appear to have been developed into histories of the island. It is probable that the *vitti pot* and *kadaim pot* served as the basis or inspiration for these *Rājāvali*. Thus, the earlier versions of the *Rājāvali* date from well before the seventeenth century.

within the *Rājāvaliya*, significantly, were derived from the *Pūjāvaliya* rather than the older *Mahāvamsa* and its extensions (personal communication from Rohini Paranavitana, 26 May 1999). Likewise, Meegaskumbura indicated that in the pre-British period people listened to readings of such texts as the *Pūjāvaliya* and *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* (personal communication, 2 June 1999).

Speaking broadly, therefore, I assert that in the middle period oral forms of communication were of greater significance among the generality of people than written palm-leaf texts. It is towards the substantiation of this speculation that I devote this article. Since I am dealing with such a broad span of time it should be understood that I am unable to introduce nuances and caveats pertinent to specific segments of time.

The oral exchanges that concern us would have mostly occurred in the Sinhala language, though there were a number of island residents who also spoke Portuguese, Tamil and/or Malayālam at various point of time. This last characteristic arose from the continuous inflow of goods and personnel from the Indian subcontinent throughout the middle period. These forces were compounded by the influence of the Indian Ocean trading networks and subsequently by the advent of the European trading powers.[17] In the result, at any point of time in the middle period there would have been recent migrants whose mother tongue was either Tamil or Malayālam or Portuguese (and occasionally Telugu, Bengali and Arabic).

Apart from conventional dialogues of a conversational kind, the oral modalities that we must attend to are storytelling, ritual chants and poetic expressions. It is the latter that I particularly concentrate on here. One can begin with the comments of that acute observer, John Davy, who worked in Ceylon as an army surgeon in the years 1816-20 and traversed many parts of the island (including the former Kingdom of Kandy) on foot or by palanquin or tom-john.[18] "Almost every Singalese [*sic*]," he says, "is, more or less, a poet; or, at least, can compose what they call poetry" (Davy 1969: 177).

As one might expect, there are numerous categories of poetry. Today one refers to *patal kavi, gāl kavi, paru kavi, nelum kavi, nalavi gi, pel kavi, kurahan kavi, prasasti, t ēravili, tavalam kavi, stotra viraha* and *varnanā*

[17] See Roberts 1982: chap. 2 and Shukri 1986: relev. chaps.

[18] See Saparamadu in Davy 1969: xi. Saparamadu remarks on Davy's relatively unprejudiced, restrained and balanced account of his observations.

among a long list of possibilities.[19] As a categorical form virtually all these types of poetry, with the possible exception of one or two of the occupational categories referred to above, could be said to have prevailed for centuries. One can reasonably speculate that praises to the Buddha go back to millennium B. C. Again, the graffiti poems on the Sigiriya mirror wall, composed between the sixth and ninth centuries A. D. reveal great skill and attest to the "vitality of the literary tradition" in that era.[20]

On the authority provided by Meegaskumbura and Dolapihilla,[21] it can be noted that, in the long duration of Indian civilisation, performances of song and poetry preceded written media in conveying the key messages of powerful forces. But these oral performances were themselves preceded by performative acts of dance as a mode of evocative communication. It takes little imagination to argue that dance and song were easily combined to make up a powerful mode of transmission.[22] Little is known about the dance forms in Lankā during the ancient and middle periods. But that dance existed as a performative mode is known from fragmentary information, including a thirteenth-century disciplinary code for *bhikkhus* that forbad them from savouring its pleasures.[23]

Evidence from the war poems of the late sixteenth century-and-thereafter suggest that dancing and music were a significant aspect of popular culture and part of the celebrations of victory.[24] Dolapihilla's reconstruction indicates the suggestive possibilities.

[19] For the benefit of the uninitiated I note here that these terms refer respectively to: the songs of miners, carters and boatmen, transplanting songs, lullabies, songs sung at night while guarding chena crops, *kurakkan*-harvesting songs, eulogies, riddles in verse, songs of the pack cattle people, poems of erotic desire and devotional religious verse.

[20] Ranjini Obeyesekere 1979: 267. These verses are attributed to a range of people coming from all parts of the island, including "soldiers, artisans, monks, and even some women." Note that we should allow for the possibility that these poems were composed by professional bards responding to the thoughts of specific visitors.

[21] Personal communication, 2 June 1999 and Dolapihilla 1956: 35-41.

[22] For a classic phenomenological analysis of the way in which music, dance and comedy combine in *yaktovil* performances, see Kapferer 1983: chaps. 7-9.

[23] Personal communication from Tissa Kumara, early June 1999; *Cūlavamsa* 1953: 163; Sarachchandra 1966: 9; Ariyapala 1968: 268-9 and Mudiyanse n.d.: 89-98, 106.

[24] Rohini Paranavitana in Introduction to *Sūāvaka Hatana* (1999: xix, lv).

> [In] the van of a Kandyan army marched a numerous band of *davulkarayo*.... Giving utterance to words of courageous defiance was an essential part of the fighting. When waiting for battle round each leader the men under him gathered into a *kavikara maduva*. The *davul* drums and the drums used to broadcast orders were for the moment forgotten. Not so the *udakki* and cymbals, which too had been brought. The ease with which these could be carried seems to have made them dear to the soldier's heart. They sang brave songs of what they meant to do the next day. When a specially brave song was concluded there was a huzza. De Queyroz makes mention of the noise in the Sinhalese camp on the eve of de Saa's defeat at Vellavaya.[25]

I need hardly dwell on the evocative power of a well-performed song and dance event of the types found in India, the region from which Lankâ derived its performative modes. In its purely oral modality of chant, song or poem the communicative power of these messages, as Suraweera indicated to me, derives from their tune.[26] Folk music, says, Sarachchandra, is made up of "elementary chants not comprising a range of more than four or five notes [that] are simple in their rhythmic arrangements. In this body of folk music would be included the equally simple tunes to which poetry is chanted" (1966: 11-12). The metre that has been most favoured by popular Sinhala poetry for "at least 700 years" reaching back from the mid-twentieth century has been the *samudraghosha* metre (Mayadunne 1999: 76-77; Reynolds 1970: 21-22, 367-68). But there are other metres as well: *vīta, vasanna* and *peda* for instance.

The simple metrical character of such representations was a mnemonic device that assisted memorisation of extended tracts of poetry, whether epic or not. This has been a skill possessed by a significant minority of people in India and Lankā till recent times. One did not need to be literate to acquire this capacity. Take the case of a lady named Gunetti Robo Nōna (1900-87), who lived at Delgoda on the banks of the Kalu Ganga in the southwestern quadrant of the island for the first 52 years of her life. She had no schooling,

[25] Dolapihilla 1956: 41, 43. On the *kavikāra maduva*, see the main body of the text within this article.

[26] "*Thālaya magin thamai theruma ennay*..." This opinion was voiced by others whom I consulted as well. Again, Malalgoda notes that the "appeal" of the more difficult passages would be conveyed to listeners by their "overall aural effect" (letter 9 May 1999).

but had acquired reading skills at home. She also possessed a striking capacity of poetic recall, a skill that only declined during the last years of her life.[27]

These skills at the level of the grass roots were encouraged by the fact that it was the fashion for even the literate to read their palm-leaf texts out aloud. From the Polonnaruva period in the eleventh century stories were usually written in a style that enabled this chanting style of comprehension (personal communication from A. Tissa Kumara, 7 June 1999). In demonstrating this method to me Wakkumbura argued that such a practice nourished the aural capacities of people in ways that assisted their compositional skills in poetry. The memorisation and transmission of stories in verse or verbal narrative form was also assisted by the simplification of long stories into the form known as *hälli*, a term (*hälla* in the singular) that also describes simplified poetic tales and can therefore be translated in some of these instances as "lyrics."[28]

On these grounds I assert that, until recently, when standardised education undermined these capacities, one would have found a substantial number of individuals with mnemonic and poetical skills scattered throughout Sinhala society. Indeed, the cultivators who attended to their crops at night in the course of their shifting cultivation and sang *pel kavi* or composed *tēravili* as quatrains (*sivpada*) would have included many unlettered men. The virtuosity demanded by these compositions requires emphasis. They bore the characteristics associated with the generality of popular poetry, a form that encourages tease and play on words (Somadasa 1970: 73).

The power of *sivpada* is recognised in a folk story about an Indian "*āṅdi*" named Arittu Kivendu Perumāl alias Mannamperuma Mohotti who served Rājasinha I of Sītāvaka and his immediate successors as a military officer during the late sixteenth century (*Rājāvaliya* 1954: 80-82; Suraweera 1976: 231-34).[29] His success appears to have aroused jealousy. A Sinhala military

[27] Information from her son, D S Mayadunne, interview 9 June 1999 and email note, 15 June 1999.

[28] This is not a standard translation, but Edmund and I came to this conclusion in the course of a dialogue relating to the Pattini Hälla. This rendering received Wakkumbura's approval – it being understood that such a translation cannot be applied in every case.

[29] Interjecting my own additions one could say that Mannamperuma was probably a *sādhu* of the medieval type: such *sādhus* were consecrated warriors or *brāhmachāryas* who "have always been soldiers as well as traders and fighting ascetics" and who formed the "military sections of ... Hindu monastic orders" (Van der Veer 1994: 43-44, supplemented by a personal communication from J. C. Heesterman). Or, alternatively, he could have been from the martial lineages, such

headman in Sītāvaka "composed songs with the refrain *kokkānama* at the end of each verse, and people began to recite these songs throughout all the streets of Sitawaka." To good effect because, as this tale goes, Mannamperuma felt "shamed by these songs" and shifted his residence.[30]

Memorising capacities were also encouraged by participation in folk festivals and religious rites that involved singing, chanting and/or recitation of memorised texts. These were highly significant occasions involving a gathering of locally known, familiar people. As such they were evocative moments that could generate profound meaning. At *pirit* ceremonies, usually an all-night ceremony, religious texts are chanted by a body of *bhikkhus* in order to ward off evil spirits. These readings are in the religious script of Pāli. More significant for our purposes here are those recitations in the Sinhala medium. These would usually focus on cultivating the Buddhist virtues (*buduguna*) through readings of some *jātaka* stories or the reading of the *Pūjāvaliya*. Such recitations occurred at *sil* on *poya* days, at *katiṇa pinkamas* and as prologue and epilogue to *sati pirit* (week-long protective rites).[31] In the result, a significant number of Sinhala Buddhists, and especially the category of people recognised as *upāsakas* and *upāsaka ammās*,[32] would be able to reel off reams from the more popular texts presented at such ceremonies.

It is significant that the thirteenth century prose composition, the *Pūjāvaliya*, was (and remains, though less favoured today) one of the texts

as the Navāyats and Rāvuttars, among the Labbais of the inland districts of southern India (McGilvray 1998: 441).

In translating *āndi* as "fakir," Gunasekera was not entirely wrong in that the line between fighting Muslim saints and Hindu saints may have been thin.

[30] *Rājāvaliya* 1954: 82; Suraweera 1976: 234. *Kokkānama* refers to a type of bag/wallet slung over the shoulder. It is also referred to today as *Kokkānama paiyya*. Since *paiyya* is local argot for "cock" in the sense "penis", this may be the reason why that the term was typically associated with the *āṅdi* in disparaging ways. Alternatively, there may be a transcription error and the reference could be to a *kokkanayā*, or *godavellā*, a type of worm that destroys paddy crops. Whether a metaphoric link between worm and penis came into play is anybody's guess.

[31] Personal communication on telephone from G S B Senanayaka, 18 July 1999. *Sil* refers to precept undertakings, generally the eight or ten precepts in the context noted here. *Katiṇa pinkama* refers to a public merit-making rite where robes are gifted to *bhikkhus*.

[32] Lay persons who have oriented their life towards the Buddhist religious quest and have taken the vows of the *ata sil*, or eight precepts.

that was used on such occasions. It would be chanted or read out aloud from cover to cover. Three points associated with this specific phenomenon are pertinent to my interests. Firstly, it is written in simple Sinhala and would be understood by everyone. Secondly, the use of the *Pūjāvaliya* at such ceremonies commenced from the moment of its inception and was among the favoured texts for similar events at some temples in the mid-twentieth century.[33] Thirdly, whereas the bulk of the book retails stories of moral edification, the last two chapters of the *Pūjāvaliya* fall squarely within the *vamsa* tradition. These chapters, albeit brief, relate the story of the island as a *Dhammadīpa*-cum-*Sīhaladīpa*. There are frequent references to the island as *Lakdiva, Lankādvīpa*, *Siri Laka* and *Sinhalaya*. The narrative refers to Vijaya and the hero-kings of the past. It even gives a sharper twist to the tale of Dutugämunu's struggle with Elära by indicating that the latter "destroyed the Buddhist doctrine" (*sasun nasā*) and presenting him in a less favourable light than the *Mahāvamsa*.[34]

The last chapters of the *Pūjāvaliya* also relate the dangers to the island posed by a variety of *parasaturan* (foreign enemies). Thus one has brief descriptions of invasions by Elāra (Elāla), the Cola and Chandrabhānu and his Jāvaka army with an emphasis on their gargantuan capacity as Asuras or *yodayan*, a quality of power that is matched by the ability of the Sinhala hero-kings to assemble *yodayan* (giants) in their service.[35] The legendary style of this account should not obscure the fact that most of these events (with the possible exception of the Elāra-Dutugämunu episode) are moments with a measure of historical facticity that render them different from the tales of Buddha's visits to the island, though they merge with the latter to constitute a mythic truth for attentive listeners.[36]

Among the most significant sites of poetic inventiveness and expression were those embodied in the phrase *kavi maduva* or *kavikāra maduva*, an

[33] Information communicated personally (26 May 1999) by Rohini Paranavitana, whose speciality is the Kōttē-Sītāvaka period, that is the sixteenth century; supplemented by information from Lorna Dewaraja (30 May 1999) and G S B Senanayaka (18 July 1999).

[34] *Pūjāvaliya* 1997: 771-88, espec. 771, 784-85; Siriweera 1984 and Obeyesekere 1991: 145-6.

[35] *Pūjāvaliya* 1997: 790, 770, 782. Speculatively, it seems to me that the word *para*, meaning "other," has been used so widely in older Sinhala texts in association with "enemies" that it eventually acquired the meaning "enemy." And this development also may have sent one of the meanings of *para*, viz "noble", into oblivion.

[36] On the truths conveyed by myths, see Brown and Roberts 1980: 9 and Miller 1978: 87-9.

interactive poetry session where participants were (are) free to recite their poems or debate with each other in verse. In the Kingdom of Kandy, that is, during the late middle period, the term refers to an institution as well, for the king had a special department (*badda*) with this label, in other words a body of king's minstrels (Ralph Pieris 1956: 17 and Dolapihilla 1956: 41). The term also describes any moment and any site where singers competed with each other by singing eulogies (*prasasti*, *viridu*, *kāvya*, *stotra*) praising a king or notables' sexual and martial capacities. It is indeed likely that several of the war poems of the late sixteenth to early nineteenth centuries originated at such sites.

These performative moments, the *kavikāra maduva*, seem to have been regular if not daily affairs at the royal palace, occurring when the king had just woken up or during his morning ablutions as one part of the divine routine. These sessions are also said to have taken place during the meetings of the king's council (*rāja sabhāva*) or been sponsored by chieftains in order to please the king. They are also said to have been part of the regular evening entertainment.[37] Dolapihilla notes that the palm-leaf compositions of aspiring poets were analysed by the king and his courtiers after their debutant performance and those that were deemed worthy were "strung on to the palace song repertoire" (1956: 41).

As summed up by Meegaskumbura (personal communication, 2 June 1999), these *kavikāra maduvas* had two overlapping functions: viz., praising the king and entertaining him. While eulogy was intrinsic to the latter object, so was wit and humour. Pleasant tunes that caressed the king had to be girded by the power of the word: in the view of the old men consulted by Dolapihilla, "the beauty of the song [lay in] the *kima*, the thought embodied in the words" (1956: 41).

Such characteristics should not lead one to conclude that the *kavikāra maduva* was purely an elitist activity. For one, the king's singers were part of a vast entourage of attendants. They would have displayed their capacities among their peers, while also blowing their trumpet, so to speak, in their home villages. The very institutionalisation of poetic skills in this manner would have been an incentive for ordinary villagers (of suitable caste perhaps) to raise their status by securing a place in the *kavikāra badda*.

[37] Information independently provided by Darshani Gunatilake (2 June 1999); P B Meegaskumbura (2 June 1999); J B Dissanayake and Rohini Paranavitana (26 May 1999); and Lorna Dewaraja (30 May 1999). Also see Dolapihilla 1956: 41 and Godakumbura 1955: 231.

Indeed, by the early nineteenth century the people of Alutnuvara had earned a reputation for being particularly adept in this creative form as well their dancers (P E Pieris 1995c: 107).

More vitally, the king's palace was not the only site at which such performative contests of poetic virtuosity were held. While historians do not have precise details on the incidence of such activity, it is believed that they were not uncommon. It is known that one of the Kandyan chieftains, Pilima Talauvve, had a shed (*maduva*) at his manorial house, Beminivatta Valauvva, at which entertainments occurred at night (P E Pieris 1995c: 134-35). Likewise, the Dunuville family had a *kavikāra maduva*, while Dolapihilla asserts that "in every manor a large room was set apart for a *kavikāra maduva*."[38] Speculatively, I also wonder whether impromptu poetic competitions could have occurred during village or regional festivities. One imagines that they could be one moment in the series of propitiatory events such as the *sokari* or *kohomba kankāriya*.[39] Once the wind had been sown in this manner, of course, the ordinary folk were free to appropriate snatches and make improvisations of their own choosing.

It is suggestive, too, that in the idealised eulogies expressed within the *hatan kavi* (war poems) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the poetic composers referred to the presence of poets and spoke of song and dance (cf. the images in App. II and III below) during the celebrations attending victorious battles.[40] These are, to be sure, details within fabulous tales embellishing recorded events. But one can assume that they drew on contemporary practices for their amplifications of background context. Such references suggest that groups of men (or women) at work in paddy field or fishing *wādiya* (camp), as well as militia in camp or on the march, are likely to have fashioned their own repertoire of songs/poems.

Another institutionalised occasion for the airing of poetry was provided when members of the royalty or chieftains, such as *adigârs* and *disāvas*, ventured forth beyond their abodes. Jonville made the following observation

[38] Godakumbura 1955: 307 and Dolapihilla 1956: 43.

[39] On these dramatic events, see Sarachchandra 1966: 54-6. There are interludes during the performance of *kohomba kankāriya* where it is permissible for members of the audience to intervene with versified improvisations demanding replies in impromptu verse from the performers. Though *kohomba kankāriya* are believed to originate in the Kandyan period, Meegaskumbara believes they must be older because "of the uniformity and sacredness of their tradition" (via email note from D P M Weerakkody, 1 July 1999).

[40] P E Pieris 1909, v 261.

in the early nineteenth century: "[t]he Sinhalese are very fond of hearing songs. A great man when travelling has often one singer before and another behind his Palanquin" (quoted in P E Pieris 1995c: 625). Whereas Jonville responded with distaste to the mournful air of this music, there is little doubt that the generality of Sinhala people had a far more profound appreciation of this mode of representation. Here, then, we see professional poets literally sowing the wind.

Their 'seeds' were also falling on beds that had been prepared from the cradle so to speak. The seventeenth century English prisoner, Robert Knox, noted that the people of the Kandyan Kingdom "bid their Children to sing songs when they go to bed." And he peevishly noted their inclination to wake up at various moments during the night, chew betel and then "sing songs until they [fell] a sleep again" (1911: 131). John Davy, then, got his facts right.

As this latter instance indicates, oral communications involving bodies of people were not restricted to poetry/song sessions and named ritual assemblies. Reading aloud from a text appears to have been a common practice in less formal circumstances. Gananath Obeyesekere notes that

> [Buddhist stories from the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*] and the book of *jātaka* tales ... were enormously popular in Sri Lanka and became known to peasants through the sermons of ordinary village monks and through literate virtuosos in their own villages who would read aloud to the peasant audience from these texts on Buddhist holy (*poya*) days. ... The abstract ethics ... of the doctrinal tradition were given an immediacy, a concreteness and an ethical salience ... through storytelling (1991: 150-51).

Well before printed texts were plentiful, in the mid nineteenth century, James de Alwis commonly observed one man reading a text aloud to a body of people, a phenomenon, he added, that occurred in the villages as well as "the heart of towns" (W A de Silva 1915/16: 27). This is what I, in my quaint way, would call "listening reading."

Some learned men may even have read aloud to themselves, albeit in circumstances that embraced others. Dingiri Banda Ellepola in the early-mid twentieth century provides one such instance. About the twilight hour, seated in the dining room of his house in the Central Highlands, he would read passages from the *jātaka* stories or such texts as the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* in his sonorous voice. He was reading for himself, but the children in the extended household would gather round on occasions. And the occasional interruption and query was both permitted and responded

to. That was in part how the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* entered Ranjini Obeyesekere's consciousness, though it was supplemented by other moments where the same stories were related to her (1991: ix-x). This particular thirteenth century text, the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*, it should be noted, is a piece of classical literature that is aimed at the unlearned and therefore written in relatively simple prose. Although it is a written text, the "tone in which the stories are told ... often suggests the speaking voice of a storyteller."[41]

Ranjini Obeyesekere goes on to argue that storytelling has been one of the most powerful mediums through which Sinhala children in her time, as well as the generations before, "learned to be Buddhists" (1991: x). And, one could add, since the medium was Sinhala, and since some stories related to the island's history or its special place in Buddha's vision, it is how they became Sinhala and knew they were Sinhala. Storytelling was a particularly evocative activity during pilgrimages or *vandanā gaman*. In a striking passage Gananath Obeyesekere has clarified how the "obligatory pilgrimage" expands a villager's worldview in ways that produce a meaningful collective identity or sense of "moral community" (1997: 364-65; 1979b: 214). Pilgrimages in the past would have generally involved long treks on foot, often on narrow paths through jungle country. The devotees sang or chanted *vandanā gī* (pilgrim songs/poems) enroute, partly to evoke the right mood, but also to protect themselves from wild animals (and, I suspect, evil spirits). As late as the mid twentieth century there were people in the Kandy locality who used to eschew the roads and take the old pilgrim paths to Mahiyangana. And others in the Galle area would take the old paths to Srī Pāda (Adam's Peak) rather than taking the quicker, albeit roundabout, rail or road routes.[42]

Pilgrim journeys did not require modern rail and road networks. That such pilgrimages occurred throughout the island's history is certain (C R de Silva 1995: 12), though one cannot provide detailed statistics on the incidence of such journeys. In so far as these journeys were often reaching towards one of the *solosmastāna*, the pilgrims would have invariably encountered stories about the hero-kings who had built the religious edifices or bestowed other benefactions on the Buddha *sāsana* or recovered sacred sites from the hands of foreign invaders.

These long journeys involved wayside sojourns at resting places known as *ambalamas*. These were usually open sheds with a thatched roof held up by a set of pillars, sometimes on a raised stone foundation as a precaution against elephants, and containing a few rude benches and some clay pots

[41] R. Obeyesekere 1991: xvi. Also see Godakumbura 1955: 87-8 and Ariyapala 1968: 28-30.

[42] Information conveyed personally by S. B. Herath and R. C. Somapala respectively.

with water. There were many such 'inns' on the main paths (P E Pieris 1995c: 223-4; Dassanayake 2000). *Ambalamas* were free spaces utilised not only by wayfarers of all sorts, but also by local residents who gathered at such spots for a chew and a gossip. At some locations they were even used as meeting halls for local village councils, the *gansabhāva* (Pieris 1995c: 224). Since *ambalamas* existed from the earliest times, this activity would have a long history.[43] Knox's observations in the mid seventeenth century indicate that the *ambalama* was a site for discussions of topical subjects of the day.

> At their leisure when their affairs permit, they commonly meet at places built for strangers and way-faring men to lodge in, in their language called Amblomb, where they sit chewing Betel, ... discoursing concerning the Affairs at Court, between the King and great Men; and what Employment the People of the City are busied about. For as it is the chief of their business to serve the King, so the chief of their discourse is concerning such matters. Also they talk of their own affairs, about Catel and Husbandry, Laws and Government of their Countrey, ... (Knox 1911: 159).

This sort of evidence suggests that the *ambalama* (see cover picture) has been second only to the temple as a site of cultural production and transmission till the twentieth century.

Indeed, among scholars the *ambalama* is widely linked with many Sinhala folk tales and verses. In the *Girā Sandēsaya* of the mid fifteenth century, there is a long passage that is regarded as an *ambalama katā*, one that describes how the king (Parākrama Bāhu VI) secured the Vanni region; while other *sandēsa* poems of the Kōttē period have passing references to *ambalamas*.[44] Thus, one can speculate that the discourse at such sites ranged beyond topical matters of the moment to stories of religious edification, local folklore and the sort of tale that entered the *bandāravaliyas*, *kadaim pot*, *vitti pot* and *rājāvali*.[45] It is through such stories and the fragments of mythic

[43] Building *ambalamas* was an act of merit. Coomaraswamy states that the *ambalama* was an "ancient institution." Among the wayfarers who utilised these shelters were persons on their way to perform *rājakāriya* duty (corvee), officials, messengers and parties of pilgrims (1979: 117). Also see Dassanayaka 2000.

[44] Personal communication from Meegaskumbura, 2 June 1999 and Dharmapala 1994.

[45] On these palm-leaf documents, see Abeyawardana 1978; Kulasuriya 1978: 16-23; and D G B de Silva 1998. Most of these relate stories of villages and districts and contain topographical details. They date from the fourteenth century onwards.

events related in song or poem that the Sinhalese came to develop the pronounced historical consciousness, or "historical self-consciousness" as Obeyesekere calls it, that has struck a range of scholars.[46]

Among the stories that are popularly retailed in Sinhala discourse, especially rural talk, are inventions about the origin of specific names, whether for place, family, caste or deity. As Deborah Winslow documents, there is an abiding interest in such "onomastic discourse." Her study of J P Lewis's early twentieth century collection revealed that in 37% of his 299 cases of stories relating to the origin of place names in Mātalē District, there were references to royalty. This involved "either a simple reference to a particular king's reign ... or a story in which a king, queen, or high official plays an active part" (1984b: 81). In some instances it is a tale of a village that has been degraded by a king for some wrong that has been done (Lewis 1922). Thus, the sedimentation of fragments of historical tale are reflected in, say, the origin story of Hiti Bandāra, a regional (*bandāra*) deity, which traced the figure to one Māl Hāmi who worked for King of Sītāvaka (Winslow 1984a: 285-86). This phenomenon should be set within her broader conjecture that the onomastic tales as a whole were concerned with "legitimate claims to status and land," an interest that therefore encouraged links with state structures (1984b: 79).

It is hardly surprising, then, that there is a rich repertoire of folk tales relating to the origin of names that get re-cycled and re-cast over the generations. I summarise here the tale of Valagambāhu, allegedly a younger brother of Dutugämunu, that was "current among the inhabitants of Harispattu" in Kandy District during the early twentieth century.

> There was a woman in distress after giving birth to an illegitimate boy-child. She received succour from the village headman of Walahandeniya in Medisiya Pattu and his wife. They eked out a subsistence thereafter in the village, living on the beggings of the mother. As he grew up to be a young, lettered lad, the boy was subject to taunts from some of the lads around. In strife from their lack of sustenance one day, the mother beseeched the reluctant headman's wife and allowed the latter to stand on her shoulder to reach some paddy from the granary. When the young lad heard of this ignominy, he refused to eat the rice and wandered away. As he lay exhausted he heard the *magul bera* (celebratory drumming) associated with royal progressions. Lo and behold! the royal elephant came up to him and knelt. He had, as Sinhala convention understood it, been recognised as a king. And so he was proclaimed king. And he did not forget. He immediately got the headman and his wife hanged on a tree that still stood to mark the occasion. The boys who had disparaged him were buried alive in a paddy field that was trodden upon by an elephant for good measure. And the whole village was degraded. This is how Walahandeniya is Gattara.[47]

Even in the mid-late twentieth century fragments from the type of folklore referred to in this article are retailed in local circles and crop up in drawing rooms in all sorts of locations. One of the outstanding features of such tales is the degree to which Rājasinha II of Senkadagala (Kandy) is the subject of kingly references (Munidasa 1933 and Lewis 1922). D B Kuruppu (b. 1927) narrated a story about Rājasinha having received a critical piece of advice from an old woman. Having lost some battles, the king, it is said, went about in disguise as a beggar a few months after the Ves season. He received milk rice from this old woman on one occasion, but burnt his tongue in his haste to devour it. The old woman told him he was acting without restraint and organisation just like their king, Rājasinha. The king re-adjusted his ways and won his next war. Kuruppu recalls hearing this tale long ago. But he also heard it in Melbourne as a story about Dutugämunu.[48] Likewise in the Kotmalē locality there are tales that convey "numerous details and anecdotes" about Dutugämunu's alleged sojourn in that area.[49] And among the folk poems in the Uva district are two that relate how Rājasinha II of Kandy married a Muslim woman from Pangaragama whom he then kept at the Alupota Palace in Uva. This is presented as the reason for his special relationship with the Muslims and the presence of a Muslim troop in his forces.[50]

[46] Obeyesekere 1995: 232. Also Daniel 1997: 42, 49-50, 53; L S Perera 1961; Bechert as referred to in K M de Silva 1997: 9.

[47] "Sinhalese traditions", *Ceylon National Review* March 1910, 9: 113-14. *Gattara* refers to "degradation" by royal fiat. The story supports Obeyesekere's emphasis on the provenance of violence in what he calls "Buddhist history" (1995).

[48] Personal communication on the phone, 4 March 1999. Weerakkody indicated to me that this story motif probably goes back to Chandragupta, the founder of the Maurya empire in India (email note, 23 July 1999).

[49] Mudiyanse n.d.: 39; Robinson 1975: 17, 27, 56, 100, 198 and Sumanasekera Banda 1986: xxv-vii; xxxvii.

[50] Sumanasekera Banda 1986: i, xxxvii. This folk story should be juxtaposed with a variant version in Marikar et al 1976; 107-08. But the general thrust of these tales gains contextual confirmation from historians' findings that there were Muslim units in the armies of Rājasinha II (Goonewardena 1986: 204 and Marikar et al 1976 — where a painting of a camel corps is reproduced).

It is not being suggested here that such stories are pertinent historical facts. Rather they indicate the vitality of storytelling and provide some measure of the degree to which Sinhalese people have placed emphasis on their culture heroes and past events. Thus, during the Kōttē period historical themes, such as tales of Kuvēni, Vijaya and Gajabāhu, formed the basis of popular ballads and religious cults (Edmund Peiris 1978: 116). In broad overview, then, we can say that pilgrimages, *pirit*, *kavikāra maduvas*, *kohomba kankāriyas* and other ritual gatherings, as well as moments of evocative storytelling or casual expressions of *gī* and *kavi*, were some of the embodying practices through which Sinhalaness-cum-Buddhistness came into being.[51] Or, to phrase it differently, these are the modalities that enabled Sinhalaness as well as Buddhistness to become embodied. This is not to say that all Sinhala-speakers were attached to their identity through thick and thin; or that all those nurtured as Buddhist attached importance to their faith. Significant numbers appear to have adopted Catholicism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries;[52] some ambitious men were quite prepared to change political and/or religious allegiances in pursuit of their aims;[53] and women of depressed, and thus oppressed, caste were prepared to become concubines or wives of Muslim Moors and other immigrants — and were even offered to important men by kings or chieftains for services rendered, a gift that underlies the caste-ordered patriarchy of the time.[54]

[51] The concept of "embodying practices" is borrowed from Val Daniel's work (1997), where it is deployed in another context.

[52] On Catholicism in the Portuguese era, see C R de Silva (1972: 238-42; Abeyasinghe 1966: 211-13; Roberts 1982: 29-31). The Portuguese are widely known to have effected numerous local liaisons (*Rājāvaliya* 1954: 69; Roberts 1982: 242, 283-84).

[53] E. g. see C R de Silva 1972: 137, 148, 237. The poet, Alagiyawanna, as well as Don Philip and Konappu Bandāra of Kandy are among the well-known examples from the sixteenth century, while Rājasinha's brother, Vijayapala, is a seventeenth century illustration. Konappu Bandāra reverted back to Buddhism and became Vimaladharmasuriya I of Senkadagala.

[54] Likewise, it is speculated that many Muslims from the Indian coast or elsewhere married local women (Goonewardena 1976b: 137 and 1976b: 131. Regarding the receipt of the *getaberiya sannasa* by the Gopala family for services rendered, see Marikar et al 1976: 196-201. I have heard a tale of a Muslim physician who healed a king and received lands and women from a king (interview with S A R Nisamudeen Udayar in the Aranayake area, 17 July 1993). This sort of myth seems widespread among the Muslims and should be interpreted as a legitimising tale rather than fact. But taking or receiving local women would not have been uncommon. By the late nineteenth century, protests were generated in some Sinhala quarters against this practice (Roberts 1990: 265 n. 73; Denham 1912: 237).

Overview: Continuity? Conservatism? Redundancy

I have provided a brief exposition of the oral and visual channels of cultural transmission among the Sinhala-speakers in Sri Lanka during the middle period, namely, between 1232 and 1815. Because the emphasis is on non-literate modes of communication, the differences in education and life style between the aristocratic elites and the ordinary folk become less significant in evaluating the ramifications of the ideas circulating through such media. While the ruling classes probably moulded the character of many messages through their powers of patronage, **the capacity of the ordinary villagers to receive, re-work and/or transmit these messages** is one of the key points that I emphasise here.[55]

As soon as one emphasises the power of oral communications in this manner, a significant feature of the Sinhala language becomes germane to our evaluations. Twentieth century evidence suggests that the local and regional variations in Sinhala speech are minimal in comparison with the English, French and German languages in modern Europe. This is not a product of the post-1948 expansion of educational facilities and the attendant standardisation of language. Older folk who have lived through the 1930s would attest to this fact. To be sure, there are some local differences in kinship terminology, terms of address and sentence structure, but the differences are in the word bank and phonetic inflections rather than syntax – so that one would be pushing the point to speak of "dialect" differences.[56] As a generalisation it could be said that, both today and in the 1930s, a Sinhala cultivator from the Wirawila in the south eastern corner of Lanka would comprehend 90 to 95 per cent of the speech of another Sinhala cultivator from Nikaväratiya in the north western area.[57] Though one should be cautious about extending this finding backwards in time, C R de Silva states that "verses sung in the 17th century were easily comprehended all over the

[55] Meegaskumbura confirmed my own predilections by independently stressing this point. He affirmed that many scholars underestimated the knowledges and abilities of the ordinary people in the pre-British era.

[56] Interview with Sandagomi Copperahewa, 4 Aug. 1998. I consulted a number of historians and specialists in Sinhala literature on this issue. My notes on conversations with J B Dissanayake and Ranjini Obeyesekere in April 1992 support the thrust of Copperahewa's remarks.

[57] Apart from minor regional variations in Sinhala expression, one has to allow for some caste particularities (personal communication from Chandra Vitarana).

Sinhala speaking country" (email note, 19 Oct. 1998), referring to poems within the *kadaim pot* from the Matale region reproduced by H A P Abeyawardena (1978) as an illustration.

Several scholars would go much further and assert that the absence of pronounced dialectical variation extends temporally backwards into the thirteenth century.[58] Such thirteenth century texts as the *Pūjāvaliya* (1266), *Butsarana* or *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* would be understood by most Sinhala-speakers of the twentieth century.[59] The relative simplicity of several palm-leaf texts, their dissemination through popular practices of 'listening-reading' and the mnemonic skills of a population habituated to tales learnt by-heart would have ensured that some stories and themes were known relatively widely. It is our twentieth century arrogance that leads some scholars to underestimate the capacities of the people in pre-British times.

It should be remembered, too, that in Sri Lanka during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there was "a shift away from the heavy Sanskritization and scholasticism" that had prevailed in both prose and poetry in previous centuries (R. Obeyesekere 1979: 269). This development was encouraged by such scholars as Vättäve Thera and Vidāgama Maitriya Thera in the fifteenth century.[60] Thus, as indicated earlier, most of the poetry composed from the fourteenth century adheres to the *Elu* form of Sinhala and is relatively free of Sanskrit constructs. As one might anticipate, however, there were cyclical trends and one could speak of a tension between simple *Elu* poetry and complex Sanskritized poetry even during the late Kandyan period.

This trend involved increasing lay participation in versification at erudite levels. By the sixteenth century in the Kōttē period, according to Dharshani Gunatilleke,[61] there were highly advanced *kavikāra maduvas* involving

[58] This point was made forcefully by D M K Weerakkody during a conversation after I had presented a seminar at the University of Peradeniya, 1 June 1999. Weerakkody's speciality is Greek culture, but he is reasonably versed in Sinhala literature over the centuries. His capacities in this regard and his appreciation of my emphasis on oral transmission, as he informed me, were enhanced by the fact that he is blind.

[59] For information on these texts, see Godakumbura 1955: 61-66, 73-76, 81-88; Reynolds 1970: 19-23, 107-12; Sannasgala 1994: 164-71, 183-88 and Ariyapala 1968: 26-30. Also note what Ranjini Obeyesekere had to say of the *Saddharmaratnāvaliya*, (above: 000).

[60] On these two scholars I have been assisted greatly by conversations with L S D Pieris, P B Meegaskumbura and Wimal Wijeratne. Also see Wijesinghe 1949: v-xii; W A de Silva 1910 and Godakumbura 1955: 8, 155, 211, 243, 327.

[61] Personal communication, 2 June 1999.

viridu and *sanvada* (eulogies and comical poems, sometimes as duets). This development blossomed further during the late Kandyan times with what are described as the Mātara strands of literary activity. Among the poets of the time were Leuke Rālahāmi, Munkotuvē Rāla, Ambānvala Rāla, Samarasekera of Katuvana, Maniratna of Salialla, Gajaman Nōna and Samarajiva Pattayama Lēkama.[62]

Taken as a whole, then, this body of material undermines Hobsbawm's contention that there could have been no mass linguistic uniformity in countries lacking a formal system of education.[63] 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,[64] 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. This issue invariably overlaps with the question of changes in thematic interest and content over time. It is not likely that the cultural content was static, unchanging. Sri Lanka was open to a host of foreign influences, not least through the ingress of people and commodities, throughout the middle period.[65] On *a priori* grounds one would anticipate a considerable measure of change as socio-political conditions changed; while the meaning attributed to similar tales could conceivably vary when the audience was from a different class of people in a different era. Indeed, as so many scholars have stressed, the extant evidence reveals that ideological borrowings from India and syncretist practices were not uncommon.

Nevertheless, one must take note of the fragmentary evidence indicating that there were powerful strands of continuity in the contents of the narrative genre. Several illustrations have been noted earlier. Let me refer to a few other illustrations here. Nevill unearthed a "cradle song [of] extreme antiquity" in the late nineteenth century (Somadasa 1970: 60). One of the early nineteenth century *nādagamas* seems "to have consulted" the thirteenth century poem *Sandakinduru-dā Kava*, or derived the latter from borrowings encoded in *kōlam* (Sarachchandra 1966: 81). C R de Silva recalls a verse he

[62] Personal communication from Dharshani Gunatilake and P E Pieris 1995a: 89-90.

[63] Hobsbawm 1990: 52, 93.

[64] For evidence regarding the ingress of immigrants, who as individuals or as groups became Sinhalese in course of time, see D G B de Silva 1998; Roberts 1982: chap. 2; *Rājāvaliya* 1954: 73, 80, 82.

[65] Besides the references in fn. 17 above, see Liyanagamage 1993.

acquired in the course of his upbringing in the mid twentieth century, he knows not precisely wherefrom or when, which he subsequently encountered during his scholarly researches in a *kadaim pot* account from Mātalē. This particular verse refers to an attack on the fort of Trincomalee led by a chieftain from Mātalē during the seventeenth century.[66] The continuing popularity of such texts as the *Butsarana, Pūjāvaliya* and selections from the *Pansīya-Jātaka-Pota*, as well as the recurrence of the figures of Valagamba, Dutugämunu and Rājasinha II within the genre of folk stories, suggest that selective refrains were being reproduced, or re-worked, in meaningful ways.

In calling attention to a large corpus of folk tales in verse, prose and *kata katā* (oral tales) that has been sustained among the Sinhalese over the last few centuries, this article is a clarion call for those with the requisite skills to analyse this material in disciplined ways. These studies must go beyond aesthetic literary evaluations to an analysis of their ideological content and semiotic form. Since the stories have gained accretions over the years and been supplemented by modern (that is, nineteenth and twentieth century) creations or re-workings, such studies must invariably address the issue of continuity and change in theoretically sophisticated ways. Nor must such work be misled by the arguments in a number of recent writings and assume that collective consciousness of a nationalist or proto-nationalist sort is necessarily "homogeneous."[67] One can have collective identities built around heterogeneity, through either modes of encompassment or strands of commonness that sustain unity. Similarities or common ideas do not preclude difference.

As a preliminary step, it is my contention that these folk tales should be interpreted as stories about power and its various shades of authority and diversity. As reflections or re-statements about power and legitimacy, such tales can be juxtaposed with the stories about gods, goddesses, *devatāvas* (godlings) and *yakku* ('demons') to make up a field that a scholar can decipher so as to comprehend the pre-British conceptions of power, the constraints on power and the ramifications thereof, including those concerning the after-life/future life of beings so represented. There is a crying need for such a study by someone with the requisite language skills and/or the theoretical capacities of a Daniel, Obeyesekere, Tambiah or Kapferer.

[66] For the event and citation, see Abhayavardhana 1978: 55.

[67] This picture is presented today by several postmodernist and/or politically-correct scholars as a preliminary to ridiculing it as inaccurate.

Among those who feature frequently in century folk stories are Rājasinha I of Sītāvaka and Rājasinha II of Senkadagala (Kandy). Both are said to have traversed parts of the country in disguise (*ves*). Rājasinha II is by far the more popular of the two, however, because Rājasinha I — though the greatest warrior king of the colonial period — spoilt his record by taking up Saivism in the last stages of his rule and attacking Buddhist institutions.[68] Inspired by a suggestion from Ananda Wakkumbura, the similarities and contrasts in the treatment of these two personalities in folk tale and war poem can be used to provide insights into the popular culture of the late middle period.

Both kings are appreciated for their military capacities, combat-valour and leadership in a threatening war situation. But Rājasinha II of Senkadagala emerges as a rather more colourful character, whereas Rājasin ha of Sītāvaka is painted as fierce, severe and nasty. The distaste for the latter, clearly, is informed by the type of attitude displayed in the *Cūlavamsa*, where he receives acid treatment because he is said to have destroyed the *sāsana*. But this particular image of Rājasinha of Sītāvaka does not enjoy blanket hegemony. There are folk tales in Sabaragamuva which allege that he only killed *bhikkhus* who were opposed to him, not all *bhikkhus*. He is also linked with Ganêgoda Bandāra in parts of the Up Country in ways that indicate that he has been re-introduced into Sinhala history as a supernatural being with some potency.[69] In effect, one finds here tributary channels of tale, not so much subaltern histories as side-channels and eddies in the shadow of the main river. That such eddies operate within the constraints of the mainstream is a concomitant facet of this analytical picture via metaphor.

Likewise, the praises sung or chanted or spoken in favour of Rājasinha of Senkadagala are not one-sided. Yes, he achieved great military victories. Yes, he had great strength. Yes, his sexual potency was remarkable. Yes, he was a man of knowledge with a gift for languages.[70] Yes, he was a skilled poet who could coin impromptu poems and who was inclined to prompt others to display their virtuosity in composing poems. And, yes, there are many tales that highlight his sense of justice and his reasonableness. But, like Rājasinha of Sītāvaka, he could be vicious and his power baleful. In brief, the picture within the folkloric representations is mixed, though leaning mostly in his favour. Indeed, when it came to describing his final moment

[68] *Cūlavamsa* 1953: 225-26.

[69] Information communicated personally by Wakkumbura, Ganewatte and Tissa Kumara respectively, Dec. 1999.

[70] Note the evidence in the *Rajasiha Hatana*, v. 50-54.

on earth, the Buddhist perspective that dominates the scales of evaluation adopted by the author of the *Cūlavamsa* induced this historian-of-state to scale him down by describing his death as a meeting with "the superiority of Māra" (*Cūlavamsa* 1953: 238). Though this is a conventional trope to announce a person's death, in this instance it was a means by which the *bhikkhu* author attached a form of karmic retribution to him that is of the same type that he had visited on Rājasinha of Sītāvaka (*Cūlavamsa* 1953: 226). In contrast the passing away of other kings is described as an entrance into heaven, while Kīrti Srī Rājasinha is said to have died after he had "stored up divers kinds of merits" (*Cūlavamsa* 1953: 142, 200, 299).

The brief excursion in the three previous paragraphs provides a glimpse of the interpretive possibilities attached to such sources.[71] A major problem, of course, is associated with their use as insights into past time. Several of these folk tales are those that have received notice in the nineteenth century (through Hugh Nevill's work for instance) or are those that have been printed and circulated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One has initially to separate those that could be said to have originated in the pre-British period from those that seem to have been coined in more recent times. Invariably, this is a task for specialists in palm-leaf orthography, linguistic structure and history.

However, it is the considered opinion of many knowledgeable individuals that several of the folk tales pertaining to the late middle period appear to have originated at some point close to the life span of those individuals named therein. This appears to be the case for many a Rājasinha tale. Again, this would seem to be true of the famous poem concerning Leuke Dissāva, a beautiful composition in Wakkumbura's opinion and a poem that can be interpreted as a reflection on the fate awaiting a great man awaiting execution in the early nineteenth century.[72] It runs thus:

[71] Besides Obeyesekere's work, for more detailed illustrations see Young & Senanayaka 1998; Roberts 1989; Holt 1991.

[72] The poem is taken from N B M Seneviratne (ed.) *Sinhalese Anthology – Matara Era*, Colombo: Dept. of National Archives, p. 209 and was kindly supplied by Srinath Ganewatte. The translation of the first two lines is that of C R de Silva, but the last two adopt an amendment introduced by A. Wakkumbura.

De Silva remarked that this verse has "a particularly Buddhist tinge in showing the impermanence of power, *pirisa* [party] and glory, while [yet] glorifying an individual" – a comment that is endorsed by Wakkumbura.

puṅ sanda sēma pāyaāḷā rata *mäddē*
ran kendi sēma pīrāla pita *mäddē*
Māra senaga vata karagena yama *yuddē*
Leuke mätindhu ada taniyama vela *mäddē*

Like the resplendent moon shining over the heart of the kingdom, with his golden hair combed on the middle of his back, Minister Leuke is, today, encircled by the army of Māra in a battle of death (and) all alone in the middle of the field. (see NOTE 1, p. 36)

This particular poem may have gained wider currency because it was published in English in the late nineteenth century,[73] but my point here is that the publishers of that day, especially in Sinhala, would have usually selected narrative tales that had popular currency. Even if one concedes the possibility that most of the contemporary stock of folk tales purporting to represent events in, say, the Kandyan period are modern 'inventions,' the fact remains that they are part of a genre. Mostly transmitted as *muka paramparā* (literally, lineage-by-mouth; thus, oral transmission), such stories, in my view, draw their inspiration and some of their plots from a pre-existing corpus. In this argument, then, it is feasible for a scholar to take up a stock of tales residing in the mind of, say, an illiterate *kavikāraya* (bard) in twentieth century Lankā and to enter into the *mentalities* of the late middle period. That is, through these tales we have an entry point into the popular culture of the Kandyan period.

A foundation for this contention on my part is provided by the conservatism and the redundancy inscribed within the Sinhala literary and folkloric traditions. Anyone working on the war poems of the Sītāvaka and Kandyan periods (1550s to 1815) would be struck by the degree of repetition that occurs. The same incident may feature in the same poem on two or three occasions – even where the poem has one author. As strikingly, the thematic lines are reiterated and the metaphors keep recurring within the same set of poems. The degree of redundancy is so overwhelming that I was reminded

I am indebted to Kitsiri Malalgoda for correcting my initial misreading of context and for indicating that the Leuke in question was the chieftain executed by Srī Vikrama Rājasinha rather than the eighteenth century Leuke. This said one should note Wakkumbura's possession of a version of the poem that locates it in Rājasinha I's time in the sixteenth century! In effect, such evocative poems seem to have been eminently transportable and been attached to various historical stories according to the desire of poetic retailers.

[73] Information conveyed by Malalgoda, who believes it was in H C P Bell's Kegalle Reports.

of the standard Hindi and other Indian musical films of the twentieth century. To those who are not aficionados, such films would be quite monotonous and it would be as easy as precious to treat them as spaghetti-musicals.

Such redundancy, however, may be integral to oral modes of storytelling. Weerakkody (personal communication, June 1999) reminded me that the Greek and Roman poetical traditions were also marked by a great deal of repetition. Keeping one's plot simple and reiterating the same message is a memory device on the one hand, and, on the other, a way of inscribing an argument upon listeners by hammering it in. Thus, Meegaskumbura speculated that such conventional repetitions, found in the *sandēsa kāvya* (message poems)[74] as well as the war poems, were a means of "habituation."[75] I interpret this idea to argue that repetition is a method of inculcation, a way of disciplining people in specific directions.[76]

Dialogically Meegaskumbura's suggestion led me to the response that innovations (*navyatā*) would have been limited and discouraged by the stress on repetition and convention in the Sinhala literary traditions. Meegaskumbura met this remark in positive style by agreeing that innovations were *aduyi*, that is, limited and small in scale. In effect, he agreed with Weerakkody's perceptive observation[77] that in these traditions originality resided "in treatment rather than conception." To the *sandesa* poets and poets of war, a repetition of an idea would not have been deemed a repetition because they had composed a thought in different metres and used another body of words. Wordplay was valued. Differences in allusion mattered.

Quite separately, Neloufer de Mel emphasised the same line of argument and noted that "in the more sophisticated forms [of dramatic and ritual

[74] Message poems were part of the Indian Sanskritic literature from way back, but became a feature of the Sinhala poetic genre from the thirteenth century.

[75] Telephone conversation, 18 Dec. 1999. This conversation utilised a mix of English and Sinhala.

[76] To interject an interesting juxtaposition: the *ghinnāwa* poems among the Bedouin of Egypt are conveyed in "a highly conventional and formulaic idiom" (Abu-Lughod 1986: 238). This mode of cultural circumscription is particularly significant because the *ghinnāwa* are "anti-structural" in content and express personal feelings that are antithetical to the moral codes of honour and modesty that govern the lives, and thus the prose, of men and women respectively in this society. As significantly, those who presented these poems could not translate them into prose. I doubt if this limitation held true in Lankā

[77] Made previously and independently, June 1999.

performances in oral cultures] the repeat form is used to improvise, embellish and add variations. The Indian ragas do this with each instrument keeping essentially to the same rhythm beat and tune, but with superb variations — an index of the performer's skill" (email note, 3 July 1999).

Such conservatism in thought-form, the formulaic repetition of ideas in the Sinhala cultural corpus, was not confined to prose. Meegaskumbura volunteered the observation that this feature was also marked in art history, that is, in the temple wall paintings from the middle period down to the present-day. Illustratively, he indicated that the Vessantara Jātaka has not only been painted regularly over the centuries, but its story line has undergone only slight changes in emphasis, fine-tunings and re-workings that only those possessing a familiarity with the style of representation could decipher. In the late middle period, and perhaps right through to the early-mid twentieth century, it could be suggested, most Sinhala villagers possessed the ability to decipher such changes in style. In brief, one should be careful about visiting contemporary forms of ignorance, and contemporary forms of appreciation, on the past.

In the light of these parallels in the poetic and painting traditions, the comments of art historians become germane to our discussion. Thus, it is significant that Senake Bandaranayake reaches the following conclusion: "Kandyan painting of the mid-18th century onwards is part of a relatively uninterrupted tradition.... [The] choice of subject matter, compositional techniques, use of architectural representations and natural scenery to divide up the flow of the narrative, and their treatment of the human figure, have clear antecedents within Sri Lanka tradition" (1966: 109).

This verdict does not foreclose the debate in the field of art. Nor should the analogy be considered conclusive for the issue under discussion here. Nevertheless, taken in sum, this body of material is indicative of important continuities in forms of thought in Sinhala culture. Such a reading would be strengthened if the evaluation is not governed, as indeed mine is not, by a theoretical position that is totalising in its insistence on holistic unity or integrative consistency. Thus, I am suggesting here that the cultural contents appear to have been labile in their continuity. Another way to summarise matters would be to say that several, but not all, Sinhala traditions have been resilient in their sturdiness. In other words we are dealing with a remarkable conservative heritage that was changing via incorporative encompassment and syncretistic amendment as much as assimilation. To say this, of course, is to present a broad generalisation in speculative ways, with all the caveats that are attached to such generalisations.

Concluding Remarks

Though this article has concentrated on modalities of communication, the tentative conclusion in the previous paragraph emphasises the significance that I attach to the content of messages read in context. The vitality of specific episodes from the Kandyan era in modern times is indicated by the fact that the renowned painter-producer of calendar art in the early twentieth century, Sarlis, depicted Rājasinha II of Senkadagala receiving the eulogies of his ministers and poets after the triumphs at Gannoruva and Wällawāya. This image has been reproduced in black and white in more recent times, most notably in a special edition of a journal published by the Sri Lanka Sāhitya Mandalaya in 1966.[78]

Again, the *Vessantara Jātaka* was presented as a theatrical drama by the famed playwright, John de Silva, during the early twentieth century and is said to have been one of his most outstanding productions. It was turned into a film as *Vesaturu Sirita* (The Vessantara Story) in more recent times, while it continues to be disseminated not only through oral tales and temple paintings, but also through printed texts and calendar art in chromolithographs.[79] Its deep imprint on the consciousness of the Sinhalese youth of the 1960s and 70s was displayed in the striking etchings inscribed on the wall of one cell on Vidyodaya Campus Prison in the 1970s by the Janatā Vimukti Peramuna insurgents.[80] Several of these charcoal etchings recall elements of this *jātaka* story by assimilating it to the existential situation of idealistic, naive young men who languished within the jail in self-pity with shattered hopes. These evocative expressions, then, were an instance of transformative reproduction that suggests the continuity of tradition within the modalities of change. This is because the etchings can be read as Sinhala Buddhist contemplations and experiences of suffering that were at the same time associated with the transformative hopes of the revolutionary figures Lenin and Guevara.[81]

[78] Information conveyed by Sandadas Coperahewa, June 2000 and letter dated 7 July 2000.

[79] Information from Ananda Wakkumbura.

[80] See the selection reproduced at the end of Goonetileke, 1975. These pictures were the result of the initiative taken by me in paying Aziz (a photographer attached to the Dept. of Govt. Archives located within the Vidyodaya Campus) to undertake the job. I gave (alas, rather than loaned) the film to Revd. Houtart.

[81] For the benefit of the uninitiated let me stress that virtually all the youth who participated in the 1971 insurrection were Sinhalese and Buddhist, while being aged below 30. Indeed, most were in the under 25 bracket. See Obeyesekere 1974 and Jupp 1978: relevant chap.

This line of argument indicates that those who cleave to Anderson's line of modernist thinking are skating on a lake of thin ice, courting the danger of underestimating content because of an emphasis on style and modality rendered distinct from the message. That print media has been a tremendous force in world history cannot be denied. Anderson has inserted several nuances to the intellectual corpus that has over the years attached significance to the revolutionary impact of this technological advance. 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.

To say that modern media techniques reach more people faster and engender simultaneity in awareness of an issue, as Anderson does, is an important point. But numbers do not automatically add up to an evocative depth of response (nor, of course, to similarity of response). The questions that arise from the details provided on the oral and visual modes in the late middle period amount to this. 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. However, I believe that the essay demonstrates the power of oral and visual means of cultural transmission in the Kingdom of Kandy (*Sīnhalē*) taken as a type of pre-modern society lacking print technology. It therefore indicates how terribly elitist Jack Eller has been in concluding that the (more striking) stories within the *Mahāvamsa* were not known to the mass of the people.

Figure of a Singalese book and Style.

NOTE 1: YAMA MÄDDĒ

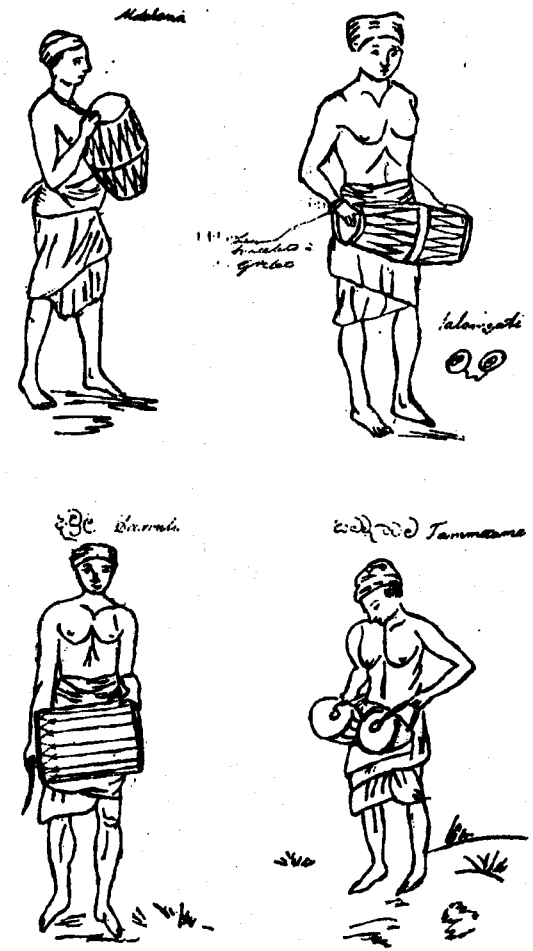
pun sanda sēma pāyālā rata	*mäddē*
ran kendi sēma pirāla pita	*mäddē*
Māra senaga vata karagena yama	*yuddē*
Leuke mätindhu ada taniyama vela	*mäddē*

Like a resplendent moon extending his glory over the kingdom,
With his [venerable] golden hair flowing over his back
Today Minister Leuke struggles for his life against the
messengers of death surrounding him
[Forsaken and] all alone, [buried] in the middle of a field

This translation is for the most part that of P B Meegaskumbura (telephone conversation, 25 March 2002), though I have taken a few liberties here and there. It is an elaborated rendering rather than a strict translation, one that embodies popular understandings associated with this event. Meegaskumbura stressed that the whole point of this poem was to indicate how this famous man had been forsaken by his supporters In the face of the king's punishment, namely that of *hituva pas gāhanavā* or burial alive. The fate of Leuke Disāva in this manner is a widely-known facet of Sinhala folklore. Meegaskumbura also noted that *ran kendi* in line two is a metaphoric trope that signals respect for age by attributing golden locks to a person.

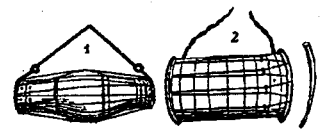
II Vilant's sketches of Kandyan drums, drummers and persons

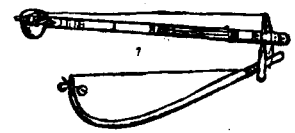
Source: P. E. Pieris, 1947 and 'Macdowall's embassy, 1800', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch,* 1948, vol. 33: 19-21. Though some have attributed these sketches and the etching of the meeting between Pilima Talauvve and General Macdowall to Jonville, Pieris makes a good case for the identity of the artist as Captain Vilant of the 19th Regiment.

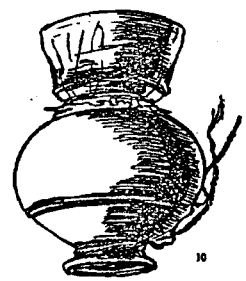


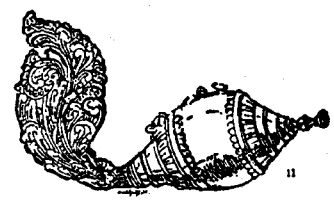
III Kandyan musical instruments

Source: P. Dolapihilla, 'Sinhalese music and minstrelsy', in Ralph Pieris (ed) *Traditional Sinhalese culture*, Peradeniya, 1956, Appendix. pp. 106-08. Some of the illustrations are explicitly derived from John Day's book (1821).









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