"The Making of a Historical Consciousness: from the Mahavansa to Sinhalese Nationalism."

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The Making of a Historical Consciousness:
From the *Mahavansa* to Sinhalese Nationalism

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The Sinhalese have been credited with a historical consciousness by
many writers who cite the powerful hold that various “historical myths”
have on the Sinhalese imagination—myths such as the story of Vijaya and of
Dutugemunu, and the legend of the Buddha’s three visits to Lanka. The
principal source of all these myths is the *Mahavansa* or Great Chronicle, a
text dating back to the sixth century of the Christian Era. Their arguments
implicitly assume that this consciousness has remained more or less
unchanged in its salient features throughout most of Sri Lanka’s history.
But a historical consciousness does not exist in a people’s genes; it is a
cultural artifact, that must be developed and imparted. It is not a passive,
but an active awareness of the popular construction of a community’s past.
There are pedagogic agents involved, and particular historical contexts will
influence the form and orientation of a people’s consciousness. The raw
materials of a “historical consciousness” are always present, waiting to be
worked on; they include documents and texts, folk tales and so on. These
materials are manipulated and utilised in the agendas of secular and religious
leaders. This manipulation foregrounds them, picking out certain elements
in a culture’s historical baggage and presenting them to the population as the
definitive paradigm of its existence. This implies of course that these
various elements exist in one form or another, and are available for use. To
understand why certain elements are picked out and not others, we must
first be aware of the historical context in which the discourse is created.
Once the discourse has been created however, once its elements have been
incorporated into consciousness, it achieves a dynamic of its own. A
paradigm created to arouse “Sinhalese Buddhists” against the perceived
inroads of Christianity and westernization can be applied to other
“problems” once these are no longer perceived as threatening. Such a
paradigm was created during what has been called “the Buddhist revival” of
the nineteenth century. As the writings of Anagarika Dharmapala, one of the major architects of this paradigm demonstrate, it drew heavily on concepts developed in the West, and particularly on the work of Orientalist scholars. The Buddhist revival laid the foundations of modern Sinhalese nationalism, but to understand that nationalism, we must, as Benedict Anderson argues, view it not in terms of a self-consciously held political ideology, "but with the larger cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being" (Anderson 1983:19). I propose in this paper to discuss the manner in which the historical consciousness of the Sinhalese came into existence; not as some hand-me-down from a distant past, but as a relatively recent construct using pre-existing themes that were utilized and transformed during a time of fundamental socio-economic change in the island.

Problems of Historical Consciousness

Latter day historians of Sri Lanka have depended to a considerable extent on the Mahavansa, on which the popular representation of Sri Lankan history (the history taught to schoolchildren and used in popular, including political, discourse), is based. Siriweera points out that the "Sinhala-chauvinist aspects of the Dutthagamani saga as portrayed in the Mahavansa" are emphasized in language texts used until recently in schools, in school textbooks on Buddhism, in the Sinhala theatre, and in popular literature (Siriweera 1984:68-69).\footnote{V.P. Vaidik, citing a study by Reggie Siriwardena, writes: "The Sinhala-medium books up to grade two did not mention the existence of any non-Sinhala culture, language or people. The Sinhala-Buddhist mono-culture was projected in these texts even to the exclusion of the Sinhala-Christian...The Sinhala-medium books meant for grades three to nine went a step further. They not only preached mono-culture [sic] but also told the pupils about the Tamil invaders. The multi-religious and multi-ethnic character of Sri Lankan society was totally ignored and even Independence in 1948 was depicted as the exclusive preserve of the Sinhala race." According to Vaidik, while the English language textbooks followed this pattern, the Tamil language ones did not; they "were full of Sinhala-Buddhist references as well as depicting the Muslim and Christian traditions in Sri Lanka." pp. 5-6. See also Reggie Siriwardena, "How School Books Foster Communalism" in Ethnic Relations and Nation Building in Sri Lanka (A collection of articles published in Lanka Guardian). Colombo, 1984.}
theory, "the speakers of Indo-European languages in India, Persia, and Europe were of the same culture and race, descendants of one primitive tribe of proto-Indo-European speakers which had lived north of the Hindu Kush and dispersed after 2000 B.C. to the south and west to conquer and colonize" (Leopold 1970:271). This theory was popularized in Sri Lanka in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by the Anagarika Dharmapala, a central (if not the central) figure in the Buddhist revival.

The Sinhalese see themselves as the descendants of Aryan invaders from northern India who colonized the island about 2500 B.C. The principal source for this myth of origin (sans the "Aryan" interpolation) is the Mahavansa. On the basis of this work, and others which have succeeded it down to modern times, the Sinhalese claim a documented history going back 2500 years. According to popular history, the Sinhalese were the island's first colonizers. According to popular tradition, Buddhism will be preserved in its pristine form in the island of Lanka, and the Sinhalese are the chosen people entrusted with this task. The Mahavansa and literary works written since the 13th century identify the destiny of Buddhism with that of the Sinhalese (Obeyesekere 1979). However, this association of Buddhism with Sinhalese appears a subsequent gloss on the Mahavansa itself; only twice in the chronicle is the word "Sinhala" used. This world view is sharpened by a sense of a history conceptualized as one of constant struggle against Tamil invaders from South India, who are supposed responsible, ultimately, for destroying the glories of Sinhalese civilization. The Aryan myth, particularly in the hands of a forceful and articulate man such as the Anagarika Dharmapala, fed very easily into this world view. To quote Dharmapala, "This bright, beautiful island was made into a Paradise by the Aryan Sinhalese before its destruction was brought about by the barbaric vandals" (Dharmapala 1965:482).2

When we discuss a people's historical consciousness, what we talk about in effect is the ideas of the intellectual elite not of the perceptions of the mass of the people. In fact, we cannot even have a category of mass opinion as if it were a homogeneous whole. There are local histories and national history and the latter is the product of the dominant group in a society; to put it another way, "The ideas of the ruling class are the ruling ideas of the epoch."3 In the modern nation state, these ideas are inculcated via the system of education and other means of mass communication of ideas by that group in society which controls the creation of the discourse; in modern Sri Lanka, this group includes politicians, Buddhist monks, and village schoolteachers supported by the authoritative pronouncements of academics subscribing to the dominant paradigm. The view of history

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2 Similar sentiments were present in India; Leopold points out that "Several nationalist writers... hinted that in India the Aryans were the chosen race and lamented that their chivalrous civilization had been submerged in the South by "lower" Dravidians and hill tribes and in the North by invading Huns, Jats and Muslims" (1970:281).

alluded to above worked in the interests of the Sinhalese petty bourgeoisie who saw its Tamil counterpart as the principal competitor in the few avenues for material advancement available to the class under British rule. This class, because of its pivotal role in the formation of opinion at the village level, played a major role in the propagation and the popularizing of this discourse. It should not be overlooked that modern Sri Lanka boasts a literacy rate of over 85 percent. Much information and opinion is disseminated through the printed medium. But unless it can be shown that the ideas of the dominant group are shared by the population at large, we cannot say that those ideas, as we find them documented, represent a historical consciousness. In modern Sri Lanka, salient features of the historical consciousness of the intellectual elite are clearly shared by the Sinhalese population as a whole. As far as the early and medieval periods of Sri Lankan history are concerned, however, we have little evidence to show what that historical consciousness might have been. The Sinhala and Pali commentaries are the product of an intellectual elite and are not necessarily representative of mass opinion. In any case, the consciousness revealed in the ancient texts is not “Sinhalese”—in the modern sense of linguistic nationalism—but rather what we would today term religious. The imagined community, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s phrase, was the collectivity of Buddhists, and at least until about the tenth century included both Tamil and Sinhala speakers.

Those writers who base their arguments on literary evidence to talk about the “historical consciousness” of the Sinhalese in effect project the present into the past. The Pali, Sinhalese and Sanskrit literature of ancient and medieval Sri Lanka represents the intellectual product of an elite group in the society, mainly consisting of Buddhist monks. It does not follow that these writings encapsulate a collective consciousness. Yet they are usually treated as such. It is true that the Mahavansa is based on oral tradition set down in writing, but as far as we can tell, this oral tradition is not a popular one but part of the monastic system of learning. The Mahavansa is based on the introduction to the commentaries in Sinhalese (Sinhala Aththakatha) on the Buddhist canon; it was meant for the edification of the sangha, and was not conceived as a history of the island (Perera 1961:30). It is noteworthy too, in supporting our contention that Buddhism was not the exclusive preserve of one ethno-linguistic group, that the majority of the Pali commentators “were either Cola monks or those who had connections with South India” (Jayawickrama 1969:68).

To what extent were the ideas of the elite disseminated among the

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4 This is neatly summed up in this extract from the Anagarika Dharmapala’s writings: “Tamilis, Cochins, Hambankarayas are employed in large numbers to the prejudice of the people of the island—sons of the soil, who contribute the largest share.” (emphasis in original). Return to Righteousness, p. 515.

5 Gunawardene (1984) argues that the category Sinhala-Buddhist was not coterminous in ancient and medieval Sri Lanka. His analysis of the uses and connotations of the term “Sinhala” over this period is an invaluable contribution to Sri Lankan historiography. See “The People of the Lion: Sinhala Consciousness in History and Historiography.”
population at large? We are speaking here not even of a particular period but of the entire span of Sri Lankan history, and it becomes clear that this question is impossible to answer, at least with respect to the periods before European colonization. The more reason then to be cautious about making generalizations about the historical consciousness of the Sinhalese. We can say that contemporary Sinhalese possess a historical consciousness of a certain kind, but we cannot argue that this consciousness is the inheritance of a historical memory going back 2500 years. Some writers attempt to do this, bringing myths, legends, rituals and the like into play in support of their thesis. Implicit in this is an extrapolation from the present into the past. Their mere existence does not in itself signify ancient antecedents. They represent only the raw materials of a historical consciousness, being part of the cultural baggage of the people. They must be shaped into a discourse, and this shaping is done by agents whose actions take place in a specific historical context. It is this context that gives the discourse relevance.

The contents of the Mahavansa have become familiar today to the people through the system of free and universal education in the island that has made Sri Lanka one of the most literate societies in Asia. It is no accident that the growth of an educational system modelled on the western pattern, along with the concomitant growth in literacy, has paralleled the rise of a nationalist consciousness among the Sinhalese, for as Anderson so cogently argues, the printed word and its dissemination is a principal method by which national communities come to be imagined. Concomitant was the development of communications during British colonial rule: the expansion of the road and the rail network, the proliferation of newspapers and magazines, and in this century, of the radio. These helped link the hitherto isolated villages of the interior into the larger polity.

The Writing of Sri Lankan History

Until about 1826, the Mahavansa appears to have been little known to most Sinhalese outside the literati. Sir James Tennent wrote of the Commentary to the Chronicle,

so utter was the neglect into which both it and the original text had been permitted to fall, that Tumour [the first to translate the Mahavansa into English] till 1826 had never met with an individual who had critically read the one, or more than casually heard of the existence of the other [the Mahavansa]. At length, amongst the books which were procured for him by the high priest of Saffragam, was one which proved to be this neglected commentary on the mystic and otherwise unintelligible Mahawasno [sic]; and by the assistance of this precious document he undertook...a translation into English of the long lost chronicle, and thus vindicated the claim of Ceylon to the possession of an authentic and unrivalled record of its national history (Tennent 1859:314-315).
The *Mahavansa* in other words was hauled into the realm of public discourse and discussion by an Englishman, and afterwards by a German (Geiger, who translated the complete *Mahavansa*, published in 1912) and thereafter it is constantly referred to in the writings of Europeans and English-educated Sri Lankans who set out to write some account of the Island. For example, Tennent himself (1859); Sirr (1850); William Knighton, whose *History of Ceylon* (1845) is taken from the *Mahavansa*; L.F. Liesching (1861) and Ponnambalam Arunachalam (1906). Yasmin Gooneratne writes of Liesching's *A Brief Account of Ceylon* that it "followed the general outline laid down by Tennent, and simplified Tennent's arguments so that they would more effectively and easily reach the younger Ceylonese, whose former training had left them ignorant of their country's history and traditions." (1968:85). She argues that the nineteenth century English histories of Sri Lanka were used to communicate to English-educated Ceylonese the political ideas of England: "they voiced the principles and beliefs that writers of the time adopted as absolute laws governing human society in general, and colonial society in particular" (ibid:88). The "nationalism" of the Ceylonese elite before independence, as Ivor Jennings points out, "was essentially a product of western education and its ideology was not fundamentally different from that of nineteenth century Europe" (1953:76).

The "traditional" literature of Sri Lanka was concerned with what we today would call religious themes. Reynolds writes, "The prose works are almost exclusively of Buddhistic inspiration and background. They are usually either collections of stories and historical or mythical incidents or books of doctrinal exegesis" (Reynolds 1970:20). Poetical works also draw their inspiration for the most part from *jataka* stories, although during the fourteenth century a new type of poetry appears (ibid.:21). This is the message poem or *sandesā*, the essential content of which is a formulaic description of the physical qualities of the country covered by a messenger, usually a bird, in the course of delivering a message; they provide little material for this inquiry. L.S. Perera has pointed out that the main concern of the canonical works and the Pali commentaries associated with them was the Buddha’s life and the development of his doctrine, and that the list of kings is included as a chronological framework. A king’s worth is measured according to his service to the sangha and to the faith (Perera 1961:29-30). According to Paranavitana, "the study of secular history for its own sake would have come within the thirty-two topics of discussion, beginning with talk about kings... from which a good monk should desist" (1969:53). These subjects become suitable for a monk’s study if a suitable Buddhist moral can be drawn from them. The Buddhist clergy and the

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6 For example, the *Amavatara*, *Butsarana*, *Pujavaliya*, *Saddharmaratinavaliya*, *Ummaggajatakaya*, and *Saddharmalankaraya*. 
Buddhist temple were the focus of the ancient system of education, and the education of the general mass of the people "was achieved mainly through the medium of religious discourses on the Buddhist doctrine, life of the Buddha and on the Buddhist way of life" (Abeywardhana 1969:197; see also Adikaram 1969:15-16).

From about the seventeenth century onward however, a number of different genres appear in the literature of and on Sri Lanka, all of them alien to Sinhala literary tradition as I have sketched it above. These are the "historical" narratives, travel accounts, and memoirs of the Europeans who were connected with the island's affairs. Colonialism itself gave birth to Sinhalese equivalents of European literary genres, which have largely replaced the earlier ones. A careful examination of what Europeans in Sri Lanka had to say, seen in the context in which it was said and the author's purpose in the writing of it, gives some insight into the "historicity" of Sinhalese nationalism. Of these, the most remarkable and perhaps the most valuable for this discussion is An Historical Relation of Ceylon by Robert Knox.

Knox was an English sailor in the service of the East India Company who was taken prisoner by the Sinhalese in 1660 when his ship put into Koddiyar Bay (on the east coast). He spent almost twenty years as a prisoner of the King of Kandy, during which he learned the language and became "almost indistinguishable from the Sinhalese." He lived in a number of different place in the Kandyan Kingdom, living the life of a Kandyan villager while travelling extensively within its confines pursuing a living as an itinerant peddler. His book is a principal source for the social history of the Kandyan Kingdom, and according to Saparamadu, is "one of the most unbiased accounts ever written on Ceylon." Knox wrote in a prose devoid of ornament and largely devoid of metaphor; "His is the dry scientific mind, anxious to present his material as carefully as he could" (Ludowyk 1954:269). Of the origin of the "Chingulays", Knox observes:

I have asked them, whence they derive themselves, but they could not tell.

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7 See relevant articles in Education in Ceylon: A Centenary Volume for discussions of this point.  
8 A good discussion of the literary forms and styles that dominated the writing of the Pali and Sinhala commentaries is to be found in L.S. Perera (1961) "The Pali Chronicles of Ceylon."  
9 S.D. Saparamadu, Introduction to An Historical Relation of Ceylon, p.xxxiii.  
10 Saparamadu, p. xxxv, op. cit. In addition to what has been said above, Saparamadu cites a number of reasons for this. One is Knox's religious background; a non dissenting Puritan, he was not imbued with the missionary zeal that discoloured later European accounts of the island. He also came from an England still primarily agricultural, "a society which was in many ways akin to Sinhalese society in the Seventeenth Century." Finally, Knox wrote the book "for his own satisfaction and his own personal ends;" he had no agenda to further.
They say their land was first inhabited by Devils, of which they have a long Fable... (1666 [1681]: 115)

Knox has also heard from some Portuguese a variant of the Vijaya story, but this is as much as he has been able to discover about the origins of the Sinhalese. Knox tells us little one way or another about the nature and extent of "historical consciousness" among the seventeenth century Kandyans, but his account, when considered together with what else we know about the Kandyan Kingdom, indicates that historical consciousness of the sort described today for the Sinhalese did not then exist. Dharmadasa points out that the period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries was marked by a general decay of Buddhist institutions in the island, including the Buddhist literary tradition, this trend being reversed by the accession of Kirti Sri Rajasinghe to the throne (Dharmadasa 1972:127; Coomaraswamy 1956 [1908]: 12). In his list of books used in temple education in the Kandyon highlands prior to 1815, Coomaraswamy mentions no work that in any way could be regarded as being "historical" in content (Coomaraswamy 1956 [1908]: 50-51). Knox himself appears to have had little to do with the Kandyon elite, including the more learned monks, from whom perhaps he might have received more information on "Sinhalese" ideas of their past. What he records however is what was available to him in the circles in which he moved:

I have writ nothing but either what I am assured of by my own personal Knowledge to be true.... or what I have received from the Inhabitants themselves of such things as are commonly known to be true among them. (Knox 1966 [1681]: lxxxi)

If the Sinhalese historical consciousness as we know it today existed during this period, Knox would surely have had more material to include in his account. But this historical consciousness, as it exists today, consists of a marked opposition between Sinhalese and Tamil, and such an opposition did not exist in the Kandyon Kingdom (Gunewardena 1984:29-32). The Kandyon Kingdom had a caste structure based on service to noble and king, with allegiance to the Buddhist religion as the overarching identity. For a century, the kingdom was ruled by a Nayakkar dynasty from South India, who remained in power because they were the only family of Kshatriya caste in the country (the kingship being associated with ritual caste status), and, by public avowal at least, were Buddhists. The point is that the Kandyans were prepared to tolerate the king’s South Indian origin provided he accommodated himself to the common identity—that is, the community of Buddhists. An alien imposition would have been a Hindu king ruling a Buddhist polity, not a "Tamil" king ruling a "Sinhalese" one. The emphasis however, as I shall discuss, was to shift in the nineteenth century from a focus on religion to a focus on language.
The Development of a Sinhalese Identity

The category "Sinhalese" is both an objective and a subjective category. It is objective in the sense that the Sinhalese exist as a distinct cultural group, its boundaries indicated primarily by language. If, however, we delve more deeply into the matter and try to seek out what actually constitutes a Sinhalese, the answer becomes more problematic. The nature of this problem is exemplified in the case of the Karava.

The Karave caste is found in both the Sinhalese and the Tamil communities, and exemplifies the formation of the category "Sinhalese" both in an objective sense and a subjective one. The sense is objective, because the Karava is one of the many strands that has become woven over time into the fabric of Sinhalese nationhood: the community of people who identify themselves as Sinhalese; subjective, because it exemplifies how a people not originally regarding themselves as members of a particular community come to perceive themselves as part of it. Subjective refers to an emic consciousness of group identity, objective to an etic one. According to Raghavan, the Karava are the descendants of South Indian mercenaries, who began to arrive in Sri Lanka from at least early historical times. There is a Karava tradition that they are the descendants of the Kauravas, who became dispersed after their defeat by the Pandavas—the story related in the Maha Bharatha (Raghavan 1961:6). According to the Mukkan Hatana, an old Sinhalese manuscript now in the British Museum, Negombo (an important Karava town) was given as paraveni land to mercenary soldiers from southern India employed by King Parakramabahu VI of Kotte (1412-1467). Those mercenaries who settled in the country "gradually adopted the language and culture of their neighbours..." (Raghavan 1961:5). 11 Roberts mentions an oral tradition relating to the antecedents of Jeronis Peiris, a Karava member of the new elite in nineteenth century Ceylon. According to this family tradition, the father of Jeronis Peiris was the son of a Rajput warrior from North India, who was the commander of a troop of mercenaries in the service of Kirri Sri Rajasinghe, the King of Kandy (1747-1782). He remained in the country after his period of service, adopting Kandyen dress and a Sinhalese name (Roberts 1975:6). Roberts comments, "The tradition betrays an attempt to claim Indian origins and Kshatriya affiliations that is not uncommon among Karava families" (ibid.). The claim to Kshatriya status was part of the Karava response to Goigama status dominance, to which we refer again below. This process of assimilation and transformation continues today. Stirrat observes of the (Catholic) Karava (fishing) communities he studied that "Tamil tends to be the language of the home and the sea; Sinhalese the language of the marketplace and of dealings in general with outsiders...since the early sixties, Sinhalese has become more and more

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11 The Mahavamsa itself contains numerous references to mercenary armies from southern India employed by "Sinhalese" kings, many of whom in fact appear to have been of South Indian origin themselves (not including those identified in the Chronicle as invaders or usurpers from India).
important... a process encouraged by the Catholic church."12 On the other hand, the Buddhist Karava are completely "Sinhalized".

The factor of religion blurs the neat demarcation of categories even further. The label "Karava" includes Catholics, Protestants, Hindus and Buddhists. The Catholic Karava, concentrated mostly in the coastal strip running north from Colombo up to about Chilaw are the legacy of Portuguese proselytizing. The Buddhist Karava are settled along the southern and south-western coasts, and the Hindu Karava remain within the Tamil community. In modern Sri Lanka, there is no such thing as a Tamil Buddhist, nor does the category Sinhalese Hindu exist. Raghavan cites "the evidence of the "pagan" names preserved in the Portuguese Tombo" to show that "in Negombo certainly, and probably also in other parts, the people were Hindus prior to conversion" (Raghavan 1961:31).

Michael Roberts' account of the Karava indicates that a central dynamic of group interaction in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries was between the Karava and the Goigama caste. In terms of numbers and status the Goigama are preponderant in the Sinhalese caste structure. "'Smashing the favoured Goigama class' became a major aim of the Karava elite" (Roberts 1982:290; see also Ryan 1953:332-33). Exploitation of the economic opportunities made available under British rule was the avenue through which the Karava rose in the status hierarchy of the caste system. It is relevant too that the Karava were a major factor behind the Buddhist revival of the nineteenth century. Implicit in Roberts’ argument is that an accident of history—the advent of the Dutch to Sri Lanka—may have brought the Karava into the Sinhala fold:

If the Portuguese had continued to rule the Maritime Provinces and if the majority of Karava had remained Catholics, it is possible that the centrifugal tendency may have gained ascendancy. As it was, the process of integration and assimilation into Sinhalese society assumed the upper hand in the eighteenth and subsequent centuries (Roberts 1982: 285).

There is no space to enter here into a detailed discussion of the process by which the Karava became "Sinhalized". Some points, however, should be noted. Most obviously, only those "Karava" who settled in areas occupied by Sinhala speaking people came to be "Sinhalized". Adoption of the language over time would have provided the bridge to other aspects of the Sinhalese identity:

As the Sinhala language gained ascendancy, many indigenous cultural practices (e.g. healing rituals) were widely adopted. Even the significant minority of Karava Catholics were not immune to this process of indigenisation (Roberts 1982:3).

Stirrat has shown that this process still continues. The Karava exemplify the point that there is no monolithic Sinhalese identity, but rather that the Sinhalese are a linguistic and cultural grouping that has been created over the centuries by incorporating and assimilating new immigrant groups from India, primarily from its southern cone. This process continues today, but the vehicle of assimilation is no longer religion but language. The concept of Sinhalese today no longer includes only Buddhists but all those who have a putative claim to Sinhalese as their "mother tongue." Buddhism continues to be a fundamentally important part of the Sinhalese identity, inasmuch as the overwhelming majority of Sinhalese are Buddhists, but I argue that it is no longer the dominant criterion of Sinhaleseness. This contrasts with the portrayal of events in the *Mahavansa* : the struggle there is between Buddhists and unbelievers, but in modern Sri Lanka the struggle is between Sinhalese and Tamils. A paradigm shift has taken place, and it is to the processes of that shift that we now turn.

**Sinhalese Nationalism and the Transformation of Buddhism**

I argued early in this paper that to understand why particular elements in a culture's historical baggage are foregrounded, we must look to the context in which that foregrounding takes place. Such a context is the fundamental transformation that took place in the island's social and economic structure from about the Dutch period. This transformation, which resulted in the emergence of a new elite group in society based on capitalist relations of production in place of the former system of service tenure, had important consequences for the Sinhalese conception of Buddhism. I shall argue in this section that the change in the material base was central to the redefinition of group consciousness that took place among Sinhalese speaking people during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Sinhalese self-identity was transformed from being primarily Buddhist to being primarily Sinhalese, in the linguistic sense. Language edged out religion as the central focus of the identity, and the events of the last decade have served to reinforce this, and to minimize, at least for the time being, the caste and religious divisions that Bryce Ryan found so marked in the 1950's. While Sinhalese speaking Buddhists continue to think of

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13 For example, one of Dutugemunu's ten great heroes, Nandhimitta, is the nephew of one of Elara's generals, and a Buddhist, who made a habit of killing "Damilas" who desecrated sacred Buddhist shrines. He finally abandons his uncle's service and goes to the "Sinhalese" kingdom of Ruhuna in the south because, he says, "In Rohana there are still princes who have faith in the three gems. There will I serve the king, and when I have overcome all the Damillas and have conferred the overlordship on the princes, I shall make the doctrine of the Buddha to shine forth brightly". *Mahavamsa* (1912), Ch XXIII: 4-15. There is no mention of Sinhalese here; indeed, there cannot be, because the relatively modern conception of Sinhalese as a distinct national category did not exist at the time. The chronicler describes struggles between "feudal" overlords for control of the polity; because that polity was Buddhist, the salient factor was that the king be Buddhist as well, at least as far as the monkish creators of the discourse were concerned.
themselves as Sinhala-Buddhists, they accept non-Buddhist Sinhalese speakers as Sinhalese. It is no coincidence that relative to the total population, a disproportionate number of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie are Christians. The rhetoric today is worded in terms of a pan-Sinhalese identity.14

By material base I do not mean simply technology and other "material" objects. Human activity itself is a material object. As Marx wrote in The German Ideology, "Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc.—real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms" (in Tucker 1972:118). "Productive forces" represent for Marx "not objective facts external to human consciousness" but rather, to quote Avineri, "the organization of human consciousness and human activity... Consequently, the distinction between 'material base' and 'superstructure' is... between conscious human activity, aimed at the creation and preservation of the conditions of human life, and human consciousness, which furnishes reasons, rationalizations and modes of legitimation and moral justification for the specific forms that activity takes" (Avineri 1968:76). Marx argued that each generation inherits from its predecessor "a mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions, which... is indeed modified by the new generation, but also... prescribes for it its condition of life and gives it a definite development, a special character... circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances" (in Tucker 1972:128-129). Each generation, in organizing for its social reproduction, develops a particular intellectual understanding of itself; this comprehension will be built on what it has inherited from its past. Not only do new ideas replace old, but the old ideas are re-interpreted in light of the new. The tension between these various ideas is frequently resolved through the impact of social and political factors. The development of Sinhalese nationalism in the nineteenth century exemplifies this process.

By the latter half of the nineteenth century the transition from a feudalistic society to one based on the demands of commodity production was well advanced; a native bourgeoisie sharing control of the means of production, primarily plantations, with an expatriate British bourgeoisie, had emerged.15 The process of transformation dates at least from Dutch

14 The following quote from a speech made in parliament on 9 January 1985 by a former minister in the present government illustrates my point that the identity is primarily Sinhalese, and not Buddhist. This is a popular argument put forward by some Sinhalese: "If these demands [a separate Tamil state] are granted, what will happen to the majority Sinhalese community which is 74% of the entire population...? They will be compelled to retreat to Dondra, the southernmost tip of Sri Lanka, and thereafter jump into the Indian Ocean" (quoted in Far Eastern Economic Review, 21 February, 1985).

15 A majority of these plantation owners were Karava. 57.4% of the extent of the Sinhalese owned plantations belonged to Karava, including those in partnership. They comprised 46% of landowners. In contrast, the figures for Goigama are 31.9% and 36%
times (Kotelawela 1967). As a consequence of the policies pursued by the Dutch administration of the Maritime Provinces, by the nineteenth century there was not only a segment of the local population experienced in commercial capitalism, but also "a body of individuals and families with a stock of capital, both liquid capital and non-liquid assets, which could be used as primary capital for new ventures" (Roberts 1979b:159). The British period provided opportunities for the expansion of this capital, and of the bourgeoisie. This new grouping, educated in English and substantially Christian, cut across ethnic, caste and religious lines.

The wealth acquired by this emerging elite was closely related to the means whereby it consolidated its position: education in the English language schools run by the colonial administration and by Christian missionaries. The products of these schools adopted the English language, English manners, English ideas, and English dress; they could not, however, become English themselves. They remained "subordinate to the British compradore bourgeoisie within the island" (Roberts 1979b:153).

An important factor in consciousness forming during the nineteenth century was the increasingly aggressive activities of the Christian missionaries. Their aims were summed up by the Colombo Auxiliary Bible Society: "To instruct the sincere Believer in the duties of his profession, to convert the nominal Christian into a faithful disciple of the Gospel, and to reclaim the deluded victim of Idolatrous superstition..." (quoted in Malalgoda 1973:181). Although the Dutch had been the first to introduce a Sinhalese printing press (in 1736), it was the British missionaries who utilized it in earnest, not only to publish materials for the faithful, but more importantly, to launch an attack on Buddhism as well:

Missionary tracts and pamphlets had a fairly extensive circulation in Ceylon; and for over four decades they had no competition from Buddhists in this field. Figures of their total circulation are not available; but, according to Murdoch and Nicholson, 1,500,000 had been circulated over the period 1849-61. The significant result of this wide circulation was not that it helped the missionaries to achieve what they wanted to achieve—converts to Christianity—but rather that it provoked the Buddhists, though only after a time, to retaliate and to meet the missionaries on their own ground (Malalgoda 1973:181; see also Hughes, this volume.).

The Buddhist response to this onslaught took three forms: the press, preaching and debate, and education. A printing press was acquired in 1855 in Colombo, and a second was established at Galle in 1862. These presses were devoted to "the publication and distribution of polemical tracts,

respectively (Roberts 1982:312). The total percentage of Karava in the Sinhalese population has probably never exceeded about 16%; the Goigama are believed to comprise about half the total number of Sinhalese (Ryan 1953:263-64; Roberts 1982:297-303).

pamphlets and periodicals" (Malalgoda 1973:191-93). Apart from the
response through print, which was well organised by the middle 1860's
(ibid.:195), the monks who spearheaded the Buddhist revival in its early
years engaged the missionaries in a series of public debates, the most
famous of which took place at Panadura, a town south of Colombo, in
1873. Of these "monkish intellectuals" the most important were the Ven.
Migettuwanne Gunananda and the Ven. Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala, who
would later become the mentors of the Anagarika Dharmapala.

The Buddhists were weakest however in the important area of
education. The few temple schools could not compete with the large
missionary schools in prestige or in the sort of "scientific" education that
was sought after. This situation did not change until after the arrival of the
Theosophists—Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky—in Ceylon in 1880.
Kirthisinghe and Amarasuriya claim that "What profoundly influenced
Colonel Olcott to adopt Buddhism as his religion was his study of the
famous public debates that took place in 1873 at Panadura..." (1981:3).
Olcott is credited with having helped establish about twelve of Sri Lanka's
large colleges (corresponding to high schools in the U.S.), and over 400
other schools (Kirthisinghe and Amarasuriya 1981:11).17

The single most important figure in the Buddhist revival, however, was
the Anagarika Dharmapala. He was the son of a deeply devout Goigama
Buddhist family that had left its village to settle permanently in Colombo,
and had prospered there. Himself a member of the elite, receiving the
Western education that other members of his class achieved (and, we might
add, deeply influenced and moulded by it), he grew up in a household
closely associated with the Buddhist revival and came under the influence of
Migettuwanne Gunananda and Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala early in life
(Obeysekere 1976:229). I do not propose to describe in any detail his
career;18 some important points regarding its impact on the Sinhalese self-
identity should, however, be made.

Dharmapala was a profound influence not only on the upwardly mobile
Buddhist bourgeoisie represented by his parents, but more significantly, on
the Sinhala village intelligentsia, consisting of teachers, ayurvedic
physicians, minor government officials, and Buddhist monks (Obeysekere
1976:244). This is the group that creates and dominates discourse at the
village level, and provides local leadership. Dharmapala gave the Sinhalese
a new pride in their identity as Sinhalese; for example, Obeysekere observes

17 See also Dharmapala 1965:495
18 See Obeysekere 1976 and Amunugama 1985 for a discussion of the life and impact on
his culture of Anagarika Dharmapala. Obeysekere's is a critical perspective; for a more
populist Sinhalese view of Dharmapala, see Ganegama Saranankara, Anagarika Dharmapala
hevat Jaiye Piya (Anagarika Dharmapala or the Father of the Nation). The standard
biography (in Sinhala) is by David Karunaratne, Anagarika Dharmapala.
of the immediate effects of Dharmapala’s teaching that “There was massive name changing...by the 1930’s practically all parents—Sinhala Christians included—gave Sinhala or Buddhist personal names to their children...” (1976:245).

The Western influence on Dharmapala is seen not only in his incorporation of Western values into his Buddhist charter (Obeysekere 1976:246-249; Amunugama 1985:721-22), but more importantly in his incorporation of Western ideas into his conception of the Sinhalese identity. We have already referred to his belief in the “Aryan” origins of the Sinhalese; he accepted also the Western notion of the nation-state, and identified it with the community of the Sinhalese. His rhetoric and published writings implicitly, and sometimes not so implicitly, denied minority communities an equal place in the land of their birth, for “the sons of the soil” were the “pure lion-armed Sinhalese” (Dharmapala 1965:483)19. The “Aryan thesis” is now well entrenched in the consciousness of the Sinhalese bourgeoisie, and—we might add—in that of the international press.

What began as a Buddhist revival, as a defense of Buddhism against a Christian onslaught, became transformed into a vehicle of Sinhalese consciousness forming that took on a shading quite different from its origins. That the appeal of the Buddhist revival went beyond the population of Buddhists to include all Sinhalese speakers has been demonstrated by the subsequent history of twentieth century Sri Lanka; it played a central role in creating the community of the modern Sinhalese. The general influence of Christianity, which offered itself as an organizational model, and the charismatic influence of Dharmapala himself, resulted in the emergence of what Obeysekere calls a “Protestant Buddhism” that differed substantially from classical Sinhalese Buddhism, with its emphasis on personal striving for salvation, and its pantheon of local and Hindu deities. The new Buddhism oriented itself toward pressure group activity, and sought to purify the religion of “false gods”. It is the result of a revival that transformed classical Sinhalese Buddhism (at least as far as the bourgeoisie were concerned) by projecting onto it the Western values that had been inculcated into that bourgeoisie via its English education. It is important to note, however, that these “Western” values are no longer seen as “Western” by those who hold them; rather, they have become internalized and transformed in consciousness to become indubitably “Sinhalese.”

The development of capitalist relations of production in Sri Lanka led to the emergence of new social classes in Sri Lanka, including an elite stratum educated in English. This stratum was the architect of Sinhalese nationalist ideology. “The larger cultural system” that provided the Sinhalese elite with a paradigm for understanding themselves was the community of Buddhists,

19 Of particular interest on this point is the article entitled “A Message to the Young Men of Ceylon” in Return to Righteousness. See also footnote 2.
which handed down, *via* its literature, certain traditions for its successors to do with as they would. A particular historical process—Christian missionizing—made it necessary to foreground certain of these traditions for the purpose of defence, but the dialectical relationship between this process and the material base transformed the nature of the Sinhalese self-identity. The point is that once this transformation has been achieved, it will develop according to circumstance. The principal historical circumstance that affects that consciousness in the latter part of the twentieth century is the competition for economic and political advantage between the respective bourgeois groups among the two principal communities. Manipulation of the historical consciousness which the Buddhist revival brought into being results in the portrayal of one community as the “historical enemy” of the other. The popularizers of Sri Lankan history among the elite group in its society were initially European teachers, scholars, and writers, who interpreted the principal text available to them in light of their own ideas about nations and nationalisms. These ideas helped form the consciousness of the bourgeoisie, and were rapidly disseminated via the communicative channels of the modern nation state, which are well developed in Sri Lanka. It is, in a sense, a sort of pay-back system; ideas and concepts originating in one environment are transformed by agents in light of their own experiences in another; changes in the material base of the first environment make it receptive to these transformed ideas, which it internalizes as its own.

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