"What's in a name? Aryans, Dravidians, and other myths of Sri Lankan identity"

Arjun Guneratne, Macalester College
What’s in a Name? 
Aryans and Dravidians in the Making of Sri Lankan Identities

Arjun Guneratne

Although most Sri Lankans would probably agree that Sinhalese and Tamils share cultural practices and beliefs, the widespread assumption, both in the island and abroad, is that they are two separate peoples with different roots in the Indian subcontinent. The twin concepts of ‘Aryan’ and ‘Dravidian,’ introduced into the island by British intellectuals in the nineteenth century, have facilitated these understandings and have been an important factor in shaping the idea that Sinhalese and Tamils are essentially different. But in nationalism, as in evolutionary biology, some of the bitterest struggles for survival and resources take place between closely related species, and the Sinhalese and Tamils are very close in their cultural relationship. It is their cultural relationship that concerns me here; a relationship explored in this book through the notion of hybridity.

The most obvious meaning of hybridity resonates with biological understandings: a hybrid species is distinct from its parents but partakes of the ‘genetic essence’ of both. The first definition of the term that Webster’s dictionary provides is “the offspring of two ... animals of different races, varieties, species, etc.” (1983: 888). To my mind, however, this is an unsatisfactory way of thinking about hybridity in the cultural context because it presupposes the existence, even at some distant period, of a ‘pure’ culture, which has subsequently hybridized by incorporating elements of other cultures. The belief in the purity of the cultural species is a necessary precondition for the development of nationalist sentiments, and is the assumption that underlies the work of a nationalist like Munidasa Cumaratunga (see Dharmadasa 1992: 261ff). It has, however, no historical validity.

While the concept of a biological species requires a high degree of impermeability between the boundaries that separate one from closely related species, the boundaries that separate one culture from another are porous in the extreme. There are no pure cultures; a culture, as a way of being in the world, as a conceptual framework through which the world is apprehended, has developed not only through the evolution of its own logic but also through its interactions with other ways of being in the world. The notion of a Tamil culture or a Sinhala culture as ‘pure wholes’ is fundamentally misleading because both conceptions are an arbitrary imposition on the flow of social thought and action. Cultures are fragmentary things and the unity we impute to them is essentially arbitrary. To make that thought clearer, consider the Dry Zone peasants drawn from two separate ‘cultures’ who are now engaged in a deadly struggle in northern Sri Lanka. Although they fight under the respective banners of two separate nationalisms, they have far more in common with each other (in their way of being in the world) than either does with their respective social elites who, although sharing the same ethnic labels, share little of the rituals, practices and beliefs that shape their view of life.

Webster’s dictionary gives us another gloss on hybridity that resonates rather better with the notion of culture I am using here: a hybrid is anything of mixed origin (1983: 888). The emphasis falls equally on both terms: ‘mixed’ and ‘origin.’ That is, the notion of hybrid denies the possibility of ‘purity’ altogether. All cultures are hybrid and have always been so. They are admixtures of mixtures, and so on ad infinitum. Geertz recounts the story of the Indian who claims the world rests, ultimately, on the back of a turtle. And what does that turtle rest on, asks his English interlocutor, who wants, in a straightforward Anglo-Saxon way, to get to the bottom of things. Yet another turtle, is the reply. And that turtle? After that, sahib, the Indian says (the times are presumably colonial), it’s turtles all the way down. Hybrid cultures are like those turtles in their provenance. If there exists such an oddity as a ‘pure’ culture, it was so far back in time, at the early dawn of Homo sapiens, that speculation about it is an exercise in pointlessness. Cultures have been hybrid ever since that primordial moment. This hybridity is the point of departure for this reflection on the uses to which systems of ethnic classification in Sri Lanka have been (and can be) put.

My contention is this: Sri Lanka’s population derives primarily from the southern part of the Indian subcontinent. Over the centuries, as the outcome of various historical processes extending into contemporary times, two (and perhaps three) major forms of social identity have emerged: Sinhala, Tamil and perhaps Muslim. I call them major because all three are apical: none can be folded into another. The cultural elements which were brought into the island
form of kinship organization that ties them, on the one hand, to the society of South India, and contrasts them, on the other, to the social system prevailing in the subcontinent’s North. One way of classifying the people of the island is as arbitrary as the other, but the second view has the distinct virtue of highlighting an attribute that all Sri Lankans share, thereby problematizing the essentialist claims of ethnic and “racial” purity.

In other words, the Sinhalese may be thought of as a Dravidian people in social structure (which suggests a link to South India) but Indo-Aryan in language (which suggests a link with the North). Kinship is inherently more conservative than language in that it is less likely to change. That Sinhalese and Tamils share a common structure of kinship that is distinctly different from that prevailing in North India suggests the South Indian origin of the Sinhalese—for which evidence exists, of course, in many other areas. The language that one speaks, on the other hand, does not necessarily say very much about one’s antecedents. In India, the Indo-Aryan languages are more or less congruent with North Indian kinship; the same is true for Dravidian languages and Dravidian kinship. This is not true of Sri Lanka, however, where, the majority of the population speaks an Indo-Aryan language but conceptualizes the universe of their kin in categories shared by all South Indians.

The Aryan-Dravidian Myth

The concept of the Aryan and its counterpart, the Dravidian concept, has served to divide rather than to unite Sri Lankans. They are both nineteenth century concepts whose creation we owe to the philologists and orientalists who were busy trying to unravel the relationships among what they called the Indo-Aryan languages. The early British orientalists who served the East India Company recognized the close similarities between Sanskrit, Latin and Greek, and posited that all three and their numerous offspring were descended from a proto-Indo-Aryan language, originally spoken somewhere in Central Asia. The term ‘Aryan’ itself was derived from references in the Rig Veda to a people calling itself ‘arya,’ which means noble. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, a concept originally developed as a linguistic classification had become racialized. Due to the work of German comparative philologists
such as Max Müller, and to the ethnological theories of colonial administrators like Sir Herbert Risley, the common relationship among the Indo-Aryan (or Indo-European) languages became transformed into assumptions about the common racial origin of the speakers of these languages. It was argued that all people speaking Indo-European languages were related to each other by biological descent. The hypothesis was that these ‘Aryans’ originated in one place in Asia and then spread south into India and west into Europe and Persia (Leopold 1970).

Counterposed to the theory of the common origin of North Indian languages, and their relationship to the languages of Europe and Persia, was a theory developed in particular by Robert Caldwell. It held that the languages of South India belonged to a different family of languages, quite unrelated to the Indo-Aryan (or Indo-European) family, but closely related to one another, and preceding the Indo-Aryan in antiquity. They were collectively referred to as the Dravidian languages. The term ‘Dravidian’ itself comes from the Sanskrit for ‘Tamil.’ Not surprisingly, the category Dravidian also became racialized during the nineteenth century; the speakers of these languages were held to be of common racial origin, while the speakers of Indo-European languages in North India were believed to be of separate racial stock. European scholars of India theorized that the Dravidians had been the original inhabitants of the subcontinent until they were displaced by Aryan invaders moving into India from the northwest. These racial ideas were also utilized in an attempt to explain caste: the higher castes were the descendants of the original ‘Aryans’ while the low castes and the untouchables were descended from the indigenous ‘Dravidian’ inhabitants. These European ideas were picked up by Indian intellectuals and used for different purposes: some hailed the unity between Indian and Englishmen that this theory of common racial provenance suggested, while others used it to build up Indian self-esteem, decrying the western branch of the race as having lapsed into barbarism under the pressure of cold northern climes (Leopold 1970: 275).

These ideas were also picked up in Sri Lanka, and were used to mark out a boundary between the two main cultural components of the island’s population. The Aryan myth helped to reinforce a particular view of the island’s history that had begun to take shape during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Anagarika Dharmapala, for example, one of the most forceful advocates of the Aryan theory of racial origin in its Sri Lankan guise, rendered this history in the following terms:

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).

‘Race’ is a concept with no biological validity. It is a cultural construct reflecting cultural concerns. The population of Sri Lanka is divided not in terms of race (which continues to be a popular term to summarize these concerns), but in terms of culture and language. Nevertheless, culture is fluid and the ability to speak one or another language is not determined by one’s genetic inheritance. Sri Lanka’s history has been shaped, not by an initial ‘Aryan’ colonization followed by successive ‘Dravidian’ invasions, but by a continuous movement of population from India, particularly from its southern cone — what is now Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra — that has settled among, and been assimilated to, the social groups on the island which had arrived earlier. It is very likely that, at some early point in this process, Indo-Aryan speakers achieved political overlordship over the population at large, and their language, as the language of the elite, became privileged and eventually spread to the rest of the people. Constant movement and migration of people is a commonplace of history; the population and culture of virtually every contemporary state has been formed in this way. Recall Daniel Defoe’s lines on the Englishman:

Thus from a Mixture of all kinds began,
That Het’rogeneous Thing, An Englishman:
In eager Rapes, and furious Lust begot,
Betwixt a Painted Britton and a Scot:
Whose gend’ring Offspring quickly learnt to bow,
And yoke their Heifers to the Roman Plough:
From whence a Mongrel half-bred Race there came,
With neither Name nor Nation, Speech or Fame.
In whose hot Veins now Mixtures quickly ran,
Infus’d betwixt a Saxon and a Dane.
While their Rank Daughters, to their Parents just,
Receiv'd all Nations with Promiscuous Lust.
This Nauseous Brood directly did contain
The well-extracted Blood of Englishmen ...

What the evidence shows is that Sri Lanka was populated by successive movements of people from India, and through the centuries, this diverse population has been crystallizing into the groups we identify today as Sinhala, Tamil, or Muslim. The caste system functioned in Sri Lanka, as it did elsewhere in South Asia, to allow the incorporation of new groups into the population as new castes, or to be absorbed into existing castes of equivalent standing to that of the newcomers. The pantarams, non-Brahmin priests of the Vellala caste of South India, who immigrated to the island in the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, can be taken as an example of this phenomenon (Dewaraja 1972: 47-68). According to Lorna Dewaraja, they were given villages as maintenances, and absorbed into the Sinhala aristocracy. The aristocratic Sinhala title ‘Bandara’ is derived from the Tamil pantaram. At the highest levels of society, it was common for royalty to marry princesses from South India. This cultural fact is recorded in the founding myth of the Sinhalese, the Vijaya story in the Mahavamsa.

The opposition between the concepts Sinhala/Tamil is a modern one, arising out of a modern situation beginning in the economic and social transformation of the colonial period, and unlikely to have been meaningful to our ancestors. To assume that the Sinhala-Tamil dichotomy had the same highly politicized meaning in the past that it has today is to beg a whole host of questions. For example, why, in the context of such an ideology, would the Kandyan nobles have invited a South Indian Tamil-speaking Nayakkar to assume the throne of Kandy? Or to reach further back into history, why does the chronicler of the Culavamsa, the second part of the Mahavamsa, speak approvingly of Nissanka Malla? Nissanka Malla was born into the royal family of Kalinga, in what is now known as Andhra Pradesh, and founded the Kalinga dynasty that presided over much of the final stages of the Polonnaruva kingdom, until Magha, also of Kalinga, and the epitome of the Sinhala conception of the ‘barbaric Tamil,’ put an end to it.

What is clear from the Culavamsa — for example, that section of it that immediately precedes the author’s appalled description of the onslaught of Magha, who laid waste to the country and destroyed the last great kingdom of the Dry Zone — is how unconcerned the chronicler is about the oppositions that now bedevil contemporary SRI Lankan society. Indeed the chronicler speaks approvingly of the last King of Polonnaruva, who had the misfortune to be ruling when Magha arrived on the island, because he ruled without transgressing the political precepts of Manu. But this king, Parakkama, was a Pandu from South India who had, through military force, seized control of the kingdom only three years before (Culavamsa 1930: 132). What is more, between the death of Nissanka Malla and the invasion of Magha (a period of eighteen years), in addition to Parakkama, there were two other interlopers from India who seized control of the kingdom: Anikanga who invades with a Cola army, slays the ruler in Polonnaruva (a child of 13 months) and reigns for seventeen days; and Lokissara, who invades with a Tamil (Damila) army and rules for nine months. The chronicler sees nothing untoward in any of this, and in the case of Parakkama, actually seems to hold him in some esteem for his kingly qualities.

I suggest that this is because the ideology of the time was based not on ethnnonationalism in the modern sense, which calls for Sinhalese ruling over Sinhalese and Tamils over Tamils, but on ideas of proper kingly behavior. His lord’s ethnicity did not matter much to the peasant, provided the man observed the decencies. Magha is demonized because he broke the rules of the game by pillaging the people. Our perception of him would doubtless be more benign had he confined himself to exacting tribute and labor in the usual manner after seizing control of the kingdom. Contemporary nationalism, however, is compelled by its own logic to read the events of the past in terms of the anxieties of the present, which results in the construction of a world populated by two opposed groups that are represented as being ancient enemies. Dynastic struggles, or struggles over feudal control of labor and resources, then become reinterpreted as ethnic wars.

The point of all of this is that a careful reading of the old chronicles paints a picture of Sri Lankan history that is far too complex to be reduced to the simple binary opposition favored by nationalists and some scholars. Here, for example, is a rendering of that history by someone in the second category, inserted into a discussion of the rise of the Dravidian Movement in Tamil Nadu:
The whole history of Sri Lanka for 2500 years is a story of the struggle between the Indo-Aryan speaking Sinhala and the Hindu Tamils, which is recounted in detail in the Mahavamsa chronicle. Current events in Sri Lanka are but a flash in the light of this ancient struggle (Maloney 1986: 3).

While this sort of tunnel vision, shaped by a particular understanding and representation of history that has developed since the late nineteenth century, was prevalent in the early 1980s, a decade of war since then has done nothing to modify the stance of some Sinhala nationalists. Here is how a group of expatriate Sinhalese in Australia represent this dominant historical paradigm:

In their long history the Sinhalese have never been chauvinistic and have treated all ethnic groups, including the Tamil people living in Sri Lanka with justice and fairness. In the case of the Tamils they had adopted this stance despite the fact that Tamils originally came to Sri Lanka in the wake of the South Indian invaders many of whom were little better than vandals and plunderers. The traditional Sinhala position had not been to divide the country into racial areas but to allow persons to live in peace and fairness under a unified Kingdom (ACSLU 1995).

Explicitly, in the nationalistic view exemplified by this statement Tamils are outsiders who are linked to invaders, no better than vandals and plunderers. There is also reference to a "traditional Sinhala position" — the assumption being that the political concerns of people today were more or less the concerns of people in the past. For the writer, "the Sinhalese" are a people who think in perfect harmony. The island of Sri Lanka is depicted as a Sinhala homeland; the Sinhalese, being a just and fair people, suffer the minorities to live among them. The mirror image of this rhetoric, and one that has developed partly in reaction to it, is the Tamil claim to a traditional homeland in the North and East. But Hellmann-Rajanayagam notes:

Tamil historical consciousness, and the resulting Tamil nationalism, is not simply 'reactive,' a product of Tamil responses to Sinhala chauvinism and the Sinhala emphasis on their own history. Tamil nationalism in Jaffna cannot be seen as separate from Tamil nationalism in south India by which it has been influenced and on which it has, to some extent, fed. But what Sinhala nationalism ... brought about was a heightened sense of being Jaffna Tamil instead of just Tamil, thus leading to a withdrawal from the wider context of subcontinental Tamil culture and history (Hellmann-Rajanayagam 1990: 118).

Both claims to exclusive homelands are equally illegitimate, both from a liberal/progressive perspective as well as from a historical/anthropological one. However, attempts to disprove the Tamil claims miss the point. The point is that Tamil nationalism must posit the idea of a traditional homeland in order to be successful, because nationalism is inextricably linked to territory; and it is no less a construct than the idea that the island is a Sinhala homeland, which then relegates Sri Lankans of other ethnic backgrounds to a sort of second-tier citizenship. The idea that Sri Lanka is the homeland solely of the Sinhalese continues to be publicly articulated and remains a potent symbol organizing Sinhala nationalism. Inasmuch as the conceit of nationalism is that it is a form of (imagined) kinship, it seems appropriate to pursue this reflection on symbols by focusing on the kinship structure that Tamils and Sinhalese both share — the Dravidian kinship system. It can also be called the system of cross-cousin marriage.

Dravidian Kinship and Sinhala Society

It has long been recognized in India, in the Dharma Sastras, for example, that North and South India were fundamentally different from each other; each region had its own dharma. Although to modern eyes a central aspect of this difference is based on a linguistic contrast that has been elaborated into a racial theory in recent times (the Aryan-Dravidian opposition), this linguistic contrast was not apparent to the ancient Indian philosophers, who held that all the languages of India (including Tamil) were descended from Sanskrit (Trautmann 1981: 16). Instead, one of the central differences between the North and the South, noted since Vedic times in the Dharma Sastras, was their contrasting systems of kinship. Trautmann, on whose seminal work on Dravidian
one must marry a ‘stranger.’ In the Indo-Aryan system, a lineage that has taken a wife from a second lineage may not give in return one of its own women as a wife to a member of that lineage. In contrast, in South India, and among both Tamils and Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, the cultural ideal favors what anthropologists term cross-cousin marriage. Baudhayana describes it from the perspective of a man, as marriage with either one’s mother’s brother’s daughter or father’s sister’s daughter; over the course of time, two lineages exchange their daughters with each other. This is called cross-cousin marriage because in the parental generation the parents are siblings of opposite sexes. This distinction is encoded in the language.

However, the children of one’s parents’ same sex siblings (father’s brother and mother’s sister) stand to one in the same relationship as one’s own siblings; the culture conceives of them as like one’s own brother and sister, and this conception is given expression in the kinship terms. Thus, my father’s brother’s son (my parallel cousin) is my ayya or malli. The Sinhala kinship term mama, on the other hand, the primary referent of which is the mother’s brother, is also applied to the father’s sister’s husband and a significant point in analyzing Dravidian kinship to the wife’s father. The uncle is, potentially, one’s father-in-law. The presumption encoded in the language is that marriage is between cross-cousins. The term mama also occurs in Hindi as the term for mother’s brother, but the father’s sister’s husband is called phupha and the father of one’s wife is called sasur. The Dravidian system does not distinguish between these three categories; the Indo-Aryan system does. The kinship system that structures the social relationships of Hindi speakers prohibits marriage between people related to each other by blood. From a male perspective, one’s mother’s brother’s daughter and one’s father’s sister’s daughter are not appropriate marriage partners even though they belong to lineages different from one’s own. This is the very opposite of Sinhala kinship beliefs. Lexically, the Sinhalese terminology shows the profound influence of Tamil; the Indo-Aryan influence can be seen only in a handful of terms such as puta, duva and bōna.

The point in analyzing the lexical items used in kinship is not that they need to be the same to demonstrate a relationship between one local kinship system and another but that they have the same semantic referents. In the example above, the field of possible referents encompassed by the term for mother’s brother is very different in Sinhala than it is in Hindi, although both are

kinship I have depended for the material in this section, quotes an old Sanskrit text of Baudhayana’s (500-200 BC) to this effect:

Fivefold are the peculiar customs of the South and of the North. We will explain those of the South. They are ... (4) marriage of the mother’s brother’s daughter and (5) marriage of the father’s sister’s daughter ... For each country the [custom of] the country should be authoritative (quoted in Trautmann 1981: 303).

Different cultures have different ways of organizing the universe of one’s kindred, that is, all of the people who are related to each other through ties of blood and marriage. Anthropologists have described six broad systems of classifications through which they do so, of which the system of cross-cousin marriages is one. The majority of socio-cultural forms existing in Sri Lanka and South India share this system of kinship classification.

In South Asia, there exist two well-documented kinship systems, both of which are labelled with terms borrowed from historical linguistics: the Indo-Aryan system and the Dravidian system of kinship. As Trautmann has pointed out, the Dravidian kinship system tends to correspond more or less to the Dravidian linguistic region of South Asia, with one significant exception: Sri Lanka, where the majority of the population speaks an Indo-Aryan language, but share the Dravidian kinship system with the minority, Dravidian language speakers.

A system of classification bundles up the universe of kin in different ways and gives each bundle a label; in the jargon of anthropology, these are kintypes and kin terms. In English kinship, for example, the children of all of one’s parents’ siblings are bundled together (a bundle of kintypes) and labelled with a common kin term, ‘cousin’. Among the Sinhalese and the Tamils, however, the children of one’s parents’ siblings of the opposite sex are distinguished from those of one’s parents’ same sex siblings. The children of my father’s brother or my mother’s sister are placed in the same category as my own siblings, and addressed by the same kin terms (aeya, nangi) while the children of my mother’s brother and father’s sister are addressed differently (massina, nāna).

The fundamental rule of kinship and marriage in the North is that an individual may not marry someone who is related to him (or her) through blood;
Indo-Aryan languages. If we compare the Dry Zone Sinhala kinship terminology with that of another exemplar of the Dravidian system, we see a close correspondence. Trautmann points out that the Sinhalese system is almost identical in both lexical items and semantic referents with the kinship terminology of the Nanjilnattu Vellalars, a Tamil-speaking caste from Kanyakumari, the southernmost district of Tamil Nadu. (Trautmann 1981: 32-42, 153-155). Essential aspects of this correspondence is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected kin terms and their referents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sinhala</th>
<th>N. Vellalar</th>
<th>Focal kintype</th>
<th>Other kintypes covered by this term</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>appa</td>
<td>appa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MeZH (Sinh); MZH SpMB, FFBS, FMZS, MMBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>amma</td>
<td>amma</td>
<td>M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lokuappa</td>
<td>periyappa</td>
<td>FeB</td>
<td>McZH (Sinh); MZH SpMB, FFBS, FMZS, MMBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lokuamma</td>
<td>periyamma</td>
<td>MeZ</td>
<td>FeBW (Sinh); SpFZ, MFBG, MMZD, FMBD, FFZD when older than linking Pa or SpPa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>massina</td>
<td></td>
<td>MBS</td>
<td>FZS, WB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attan</td>
<td>eMBS</td>
<td>eFZS, WeB</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maccinan</td>
<td>yMBS</td>
<td>yFZS, WyB</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ayiya</td>
<td>annan</td>
<td>eB</td>
<td>FBS, MZS, MBDH, FZDH when older than ‘ego’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: M=Mother, F=Father, Z=Sister, B=Brother, S=Son, D=Daughter, H=Husband, W=Wife, Sp=Spouse, Pa=Parent. These letters are combined to denote a particular kintype; thus FeBW is father’s elder brother’s wife and MBDH is mother’s brother’s daughter’s husband. Kintypes represent the semantic field to which a particular kin term refers. Thus a Sinhalese calls his MBS, his FZS, and his WB (all kintypes) by a single kin term, massina. Ego refers to the individual from whose perspective the kinship system is being described.

Trautmann concludes from his analysis of the Sinhala kinship system that Sri Lanka lies well within the hinterland of the Dravidian kinship region and is largely free of the complexity introduced by outside forces. Sri Lanka, in other words, is not on the periphery of the Dravidian kinship region nor is it in a zone of transition or contact between Dravidian and Indo-Aryan regions. The evidence on which he bases this conclusion is a close analysis of the kinship terminology itself and the practice of cross-cousin marriage that exists among the Sinhalese. Every Sinhalese marriage is not of course between cross-cousins, but there exists a cultural preference for this kind of marriage which is encoded in the language. Obeyesekere, in discussing traditional Sinhala marriage practices, observes that when cross-cousin marriage in Sinhala villages “was ignored in favor of marriage with an outsider ... then by local custom the permission of the eligible cross cousin was required” (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988: 262-63). Trautmann concludes, “The evidence taken as a whole requires that we regard the Sinhalese as a Dravidian community in respect to kinship in the present and as far back as the historical record reaches” (1981: 153).

Trautmann shows, through an analysis of the marriages recorded in the Mahavamsa, that the Dravidian kinship system in Sri Lanka dates back to the earliest period. Certainly the textual evidence strongly suggests that the Dravidian pattern was the norm in the sixth century when the Mahavamsa was composed. The Mahavamsa is the only Buddhist text (barring some other related Sinhalese chronicles) to depict the Buddha’s genealogy in Dravidian kinship terms. All other Buddhist traditions contradict the Mahavamsa version, nor, according to Trautmann, is it corroborated in the Pali canon (1981: 321). The one conclusion we can draw from this is that the monk who composed the text was depicting the Buddha’s kinship relations according to the norms of his own culture. Thus, according to the chronicler, Siddhartha marries Bhaddakaccana, the daughter of his mother’s brother Suppabuddha, who is married to Siddhartha’s father’s sister Amita. This makes Bhaddakaccana the Buddha’s cross-cousin twice over. She is both his mother’s brother’s daughter and his father’s sister’s daughter.

This example is only one instance of a number of cases recorded in the Mahavamsa of the indigenization of received traditions of North Indian origin by the scholar monk of ancient Lanka. Trautmann lists eighteen examples of cross-cousin marriage in the Mahavamsa concerning royalty, and points out:
This record of royal cross-cousin marriage, in combination with the fact that the Sinhalese of today fall within the Dravidian kinship region, goes to show that the kings of the past did not marry in this way by accident, but under the guidance of the Dravidian system that was in place then as now. (1981: 400)

Trautmann assumes here that no significant cultural difference existed between ruler and ruled, such that Dravidian kinship would be an attribute of royalty and some other system be typical of the common people, for the Mahavamsa, of course, provides no data at all on the marriages of commoners. Assuming this to be true, what is the significance of the foregoing discussion?

The point of it is that the strong Dravidian element in Sri Lanka's history and culture is not attributable simply to invasions of the island by Tamils from South India but is internal to it. Trautmann concludes that the Sinhala-speaking people of Sri Lanka have been Dravidian in kinship at least as long as they have been Buddhist (1981: 404). Kinship systems can and do change under the sustained pressure of outside forces and socio-economic change, but Trautmann's analysis of the Mahavamsa indicates that the island's society was Dravidian in its kinship structure long before the invasions from South India began. Those invasions, therefore, cannot account for the kinship structure of the present population. The system of cross-cousin marriage is shared in Sri Lanka by Sinhalese, Jaffna Tamils and Eastern Province Hindu Tamils, and Muslims (Agarwal 1994: 141; McIlvray 1982: 44). Sri Lanka's population is primarily of South Indian extraction. The persistence of the Dravidian kinship structure from very early historical times, when considered along with the other historical evidence alluded to earlier, supports this hypothesis.

Language and Other Symbols

If their kinship structures suggest how much Sri Lankans have in common, the languages they speak have become the symbols around which their separate modern identities have crystallized. Language is much more open to change than are kinship structures, particularly when bilingualism and the existence of a host of regional dialects is common. We sometimes forget that the standardization of language is a fairly recent phenomenon, made possible by print, modern systems of education, and other media. The traditional approach to Sri Lankan history has tended to reify language, to make of it a symbol for cultural identity, and to then project that symbol back into the past. In this way, the conflicts of the present, which are very much a modern phenomenon, come to be understood as a working out of an age-old antagonism between two distinct and definitely opposed cultural forces. This understanding of group identity primarily in ethno-linguistic terms is new; caste was at least as important as ethno-linguistic identity until recently in our political life. The first Sri Lankan ethnic group to demand federalism (in the 1920s) were the Kandyen Sinhalese, who thought of themselves then as a society distinct from that of the Sinhalese of the low country. It has taken the threat of Tamil separatism to forge a greater unity between the two principal groupings of the Sinhalese.

That language has come to define group identity is largely a modern phenomenon. In most pre-modern societies, language served an instrumental purpose, with multilinguality being not at all uncommon. The process of objectifying language has proceeded in tandem with the state-building projects of modern polities: the necessity to standardize the different dialects and forms of speech in a given region, the necessity to have a desacralized language of instruction, and not least, as Cohn has pointed out, the necessity (especially in a multilingual context) to make a choice and label it when the census taker inquires after your mother tongue (Cohn 1987). The answer the census taker receives (for this and other questions) will have a political import. It is thus that Tamil-speaking Karava become Sinhalized in modern times. On the other hand, Tamil-speaking Muslims resist being drawn into the category Tamil; their Islamic identity and their political self-interest as a community override that possibility.

How the ethnic category of Sinhala might have crystallized has been discussed by Leslie Gunawardana in a seminal article. He hypothesizes that the term Sinhala originally referred to the ruling house or dynasty and the people most closely associated with it; it became extended to the kingdom as a whole, and finally, came to be applied to the people of the kingdom (1990: 53). The Culavamsa, for example, which continues the narrative of the Mahavamsa, comments that after the 10th-century king Mahinda IV (956–972 CE) married a princess from Kalinga (modern Andhra), he elevated members of his lineage to
high positions in his kingdom, thereby strengthening the Sinhala lineage (sinhalavamsa). As Gunawardana comments, the term is obviously being used to denote the ruling dynasty (1990: 52). His analysis indicates that the ideology underlying the myths set forth in the Mahavamsa and other texts reflected the consciousness of the ruling class:

'It was] an ideology of the leading elements of society which emphasized their identity, distinguishing their position from the lower orders of society, especially the service castes ... At this stage, those brought together by the Sinhala identity did not include all the residents of the island, or all the members of a linguistic group: they were primarily the most influential and powerful families in the kingdom (1990: 55).

Ernest Gellner (1983) has argued that nationalism was not a factor in pre-modern states; indeed, the idea that ruler and ruled should share a common culture did not exist and was not a significant political principle. Pre-modern agrarian societies were based, Gellner argues, on the cultural differentiation of social classes. Gunawardana’s observations regarding the Mahavamsa ideology fit this model, and suggest the difficulty of applying the ethnic categories so salient today to people of an earlier era. The concept ‘Sinhala’ served not to unite the ruler and his subjects, which is what modern ideology supposes, but to separate them.

Gunawardana points out that what the Mahavamsa emphasizes is not racial or ethnic ideology in the contemporary sense, but varna ideology — that is to say, it reflects the group identities that were likely to be the most salient to people in that period. It is Vijaya’s Ksatriya status that gives him the right to rule; and if his heirs are to be legitimate, they must be by a Ksatriya consort. Therefore, he must reject Kuveni, the autochthonous woman/demoness and his children by her, and seek instead a Ksatriya princess from South India (Gunawardana 1990: 56). Nor is the pre-eminence of caste consciousness over ethnic solidarity an unfamiliar phenomenon in modern times. In 1911, for example, during a period when prominent coastal castes that had benefited from colonial rule were mounting a concerted challenge to the political and social dominance of the Sinhala Goigama, the election to the newly created Educated Ceylonese seat in the State Council was contested by a Tamil Vellala candidate (Ponnambalam Arunachalam) and a Sinhala Karava (Marcus Fernando). The Vellalas are the structural analogues in the Tamil system to the Goigama. The Sinhala Goigama, motivated by caste sentiment, voted almost en bloc for Arunachalam, guaranteeing his victory (Samaraweera 1977: 105; Wickramasinghe 1995: 32-33). Indeed, in early twentieth century politics in Sri Lanka, caste sentiment was at least as important as ethnic sentiment.

Sri Lankan national identity has been seen as being more-or-less equivalent to Sinhala-Buddhist identity, and the minorities have been left to accommodate themselves to this circumstance as best they can. The rise of the Tamil separatist movement, the emergence of the Muslim Congress, and the proposal a few years ago for a political party for the Christians — this last seems to be a return to nineteenth century politics when the Catholic church tried to carve out a distinct Catholic identity in opposition to non-Catholics (Stirrat 1984) — demonstrates that this is an accommodation that minorities are increasingly unwilling to make.

The symbols of the Sri Lankan state are exclusivist symbols. They are symbols that do not serve to incorporate ethnic minorities into the fabric of the society. They remind minorities and, in particular Tamils, that they are, if not second-class citizens, at least not quite equal with the Sinhalese. Of all these symbols, the most ideologically central is of course the Mahavamsa, a term that stands not only for a particular text, an artefact of a civilization that once flourished on the island, but also for a particular conceptualization of history, a particular ordering of past events in terms of our contemporary concerns. If we are to move away from thinking in terms of Sinhala exclusivity, we must rethink the Mahavamsa and the meaning of Sri Lankan history. This may be an utopian idea in the current context, but it is a necessary one; we have to start rethinking what it means to be Sri Lankan and to begin the process of socializing the next generation into this new kind of identity. Much of this rethinking has already been done, by anthropologists and historians and others, but it has yet to find its way into the public consciousness. We can draw on this wealth of scholarship to focus on our commonalities rather than our differences.

What much of contemporary scholarship has shown is the historically constructed nature of the identities of Sinhalese and Tamils in modern times (see Hellman-Rajanayagam 1990, for a discussion on the development of Tamil historical consciousness). From this perspective, the claim to chronological
Anteriority, in which much of the nationalist rhetoric is framed, loses its point; if the content of the group identities of people in the past were different from what they are today, and if the boundaries and definitions of those identities were fluid and accommodating as the historical evidence shows, then attempts to correlate identity with territory become obviously problematic. There are of course from the perspective of a modern multi-ethnic state much better arguments for rejecting the notion of a traditional homeland, whether of Tamils, of Sinhalese, or of Muslims.

Although contemporary ethnic identities are constructed around the symbol of language, which is then projected back into history, the distant ancestors of contemporary Sri Lankans share neither culture nor language with their descendants. The Sinhala hero-king Dutugemunu would share no common identity with Sinhalese today. We have no evidence that he (or any other king of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods) thought of himself as a Sinhalese ruling over an ethnically Sinhalese polity (although, to follow Gunawardana’s logic, he may have thought of himself as a member of the Sinhala dynasty). The term Sinhala is never used at all in the Mahavamsa’s discussion of the Dutugemunu episode. Besides, he would not be able to communicate with any of his linguistic descendants. He would have far more in common culturally and be able to communicate with greater ease with his enemy Elara than he would with those who invoke his name as a cultural ancestor.

But why privilege language as the symbol of identity? If language serves to divide Sri Lankans, their kinship structures which communicate something very basic about the way they conceptualize their social existence, could serve just as well to unite them. As for the past, to which we are so fond of having recourse to justify our positions in the present — it is not only another country, it is another culture.

Notes


2. That the author of the Culavamsa holds such probity in high esteem is made clear by his observations on Vijayabahu II, who was Nissanka Malla’s predecessor: “As ruler departed not from any precept of the political teaching of Manu, he rejoiced the people through the four heart-winning qualities” (Culavamsa 1930:126).

Bibliography


