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States of Mind and States of History: The Future in Sri Lanka Can Be Decentered

Introduction

In *The Work of Kings: The New Buddhism in Sri Lanka* (1999) H.L. Seneviratne asks what is it about Sinhalese Buddhist society that renders it unable to generate the conditions for civic reconciliation? For Seneviratne the answer to this is in the changing historic relation between the Sangha and Sinhalese society. In the North India Ashokan Empire the Sangha failed to establish an institutional relationship with society because the Buddhist State collapsed within 200 years of its inception.

In the classical Theravada polities of Sri Lanka and South East Asia, the Sangha was able to develop an institutional relationship with society and was able to actively transform that social order. In Sri Lanka this relationship combined with the way in which the Pali Chronicles, principally the *Mahavamsa* (The Great Chronicle of Lanka) associated the island with the Sinhalese and Buddhism as *Sinhadipa* and *dhammadipa* (the island of the Sinhalese and Buddhism respectively) have combined to construct a discursive frame within which the Sangha imagines its role in Sinhalese society as guarantor of the Sinhalese Buddhist nation.¹ This is a literary tradition that represents a “parochializing and hegemonizing tendency” (ibid. 21) which has resulted in the fracturing of the possibility of “working out effective cultural linkages in the... task of constructing a civil society” (ibid. 21).

The failure of the ethical potential of the Ashokan State model, which manifested a plural and tolerant religious framework, to suffuse ancient and medieval Buddhism in Sri Lanka is similarly repeated in the Buddhist revival of the late 19th century. Its trajectory, one which is infused in the debates about constitutional arrangements, language policy, citizenship and even positive discrimination in favor of the majority Sinhalese Buddhist community is one which has plunged Sri Lanka into darkness. My problem with Seneviratne is that he tends to over emphasize Weberian ideal types in his depiction of the hegemonizing dynamic that Sinhalese Buddhism has adopted, since the Anuradhapura period between the 2nd century BCE and the 10th century CE.

The argument I wish to suggest here is that the potential solution to Sri Lanka’s post-colonial State crisis resides within Hindu-Buddhist resources indigenous to Sri Lanka and South and South East Asia. The Hindu-Buddhist tradition of the Ashokan period as well as the history of the precolonial polities in Sri Lanka and South East Asia offers a conceptual frame that legitimized a plural religious order as well as a highly devolved State structure.

The task at hand is to reimagine the discourse of Sinhalese Buddhist history with a view to providing an interpretation which will open up a space for the articulation of a Buddhist justification for devolved cum federal forms of constitutional arrangement. The dominant

¹ There is only one reference in the *Mahavamsa* to dhammadipa and Sihadippa.

conceptual frame of Sri Lankan history in the everyday world of the Sinhalese is one that reduces Sri Lankan history to the discourse of the Sinhalese Buddhist nation. It is in this historical narrative that we encounter the “ontological constitution of the [proper] subject” (Nancy. 1993: 148, my interpolation) of this history, the Sinhalese Buddhist subject in its essence as “the past, the present and the future made present” (ibid. 149). The task of re-imagining is a process of thinking through the past and unpacking the limits of historicism for “[h]istoricism presupposes history, instead of taking it as what shall be thought” (ibid. 146).

Ontology and Buddhist Cosmology

Buddhism in Sri Lanka is informed by a hierarchical cosmology, which suggests an ontology integral to the formation of both human being in the world as well as creation by human beings. This cosmic order constitutes the inner logic or dynamic of Sinhalese nationalism. Sinhalese nationalism therefore claims to have access to an *essential* Sinhalese national identity, an ontological presence anterior to its lived experience in the life of the people. But this ontological dynamic only receives its motivational force in the diverse practices of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.

Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism has an ontological foundation. It’s transformative capacity is generated by virtue that it conditions in a pre-reflective dynamic “beneath the level of conscious reflection” (Kapferer. 1998: 84).² But it is simultaneously inherent in the myriad myths, rites and practices of Sinhalese nationalism. The mytho-historical narratives of the Sinhalese and their relation to Buddhism as embodied in the Pali Chronicles, once contextualised within a nationalist message, “begin to override the multiple meanings in ontology of the ordinary contexts of existence” (ibid. 19). The forms that nationalism takes are devoid of meaning, but it’s very emptiness ensures that it’s overall logic within which the “being of its audience becomes reconstituted can threaten to become the totality of meaning for all contexts” (ibid. 19). This can thereby override the multiple possibilities that are integral to an ontology of being. The violent logic of Sinhalese nationalism then becomes the only possible truth of an ontology of being, subsuming all other potentialities.

As to the structure of the Buddhist cosmos, it articulates a hierarchical character. At the apex of this cosmology stands the Buddha and below the Buddha the world of the gods, headed by the four guardian deities of the island, Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama, and Saman.³ Beneath them stand the world of other powerful deities and lastly the world of the demonic inhabited by disordering spirits and ghosts. Within this layered cosmos the Buddha is seen as pure, while demonic beings vary in their polluting capacity depending on their degree of orientation towards the Buddha and his teaching. This orientation in turn is determined by their capacity to personify the disordering and ordering potential of the cosmic order.⁴ The worlds of “existence and of social relations that involve human beings and supernatural [beings] have

² This is consistent with Heidegger’s approach to ontology as a dynamic which “for the most part does not show itself” (Heidegger. 1962: 59, his emphasis).

³ Natha is the highest of the gods and in Sinhalese Buddhist tradition is the next Buddha to be (Maitri). He is “characterised as continually contemplating the teachings of the Buddha and as being so unattached to the matters of existence, that he is expected by the Sinhalese to be the next Buddha (Maitri)... Vishnu is conceived of as the protector of Buddhism on the island; Kataragama is closely linked with the ancient Sinhalese Buddhist resurgence against Hindu Tamil domination; and Saman is the god of Adam’s Peak...the site of Buddha’s footprint and the Buddha’s first visit to Sri Lanka” (Kapferer. 1991: 159).

⁴ See Kapferer (1991: 158-61).

their place in hierarchy determined by the degree of their orientation to the Buddha or to the demonic” (ibid. 11).⁵ The forces of beneficence headed by the Buddha encompass the demonic.

Thus the Buddha is at the apex and in the middle are the Hindu gods, while at the base are the forces of demonic fragmentation. This cosmic order is in a continuous state of flux as it moves between stages of unity, fragmentation and reordering, with the ordering power of the Buddha ultimately encompassing the disintegrative power of the demonic and resubordinating it at the base of its hierarchical unifying aspect. The nature of this non-bounded cosmic order and the process of encompassment is thus not one of simple exclusion of the demonic but reincorporation. Also, while the demonic floats between the unacknowledged boundaries of the cosmic order, its purpose is to facilitate the restructuring of the cosmos. In this regard the demonic becomes a highly productive protagonist. In the Pali Chronicles the demonic is concretized.

The *Mahavamsa* has been drawn upon by post-Independence Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism not only as anti-Tamil rhetoric but as a claimed pattern for political-governmental ordering and installed as the official history of the island even at the level of basic education. The Chronicles were elite texts written by highly literate *bhikkhus* (Buddhist monks) but, surprisingly, circulated quite widely outside the court circle and became both the repositories and foundational texts of Sinhalese Buddhist consciousness. The Chronicle tradition is common throughout most of the Hindu-Buddhist world in South and South East Asia. In Sri Lanka the Pali Chronicle tradition came to articulate the history of the island within a Buddhist cosmological frame. The dynamics of the Buddhist cosmos reveal their significance and transformative potency as it moves through integrative, disintegrative and reintegrative moments. Incorporated into Buddhist cosmology, the Pali Chronicles were given an underlying ontological depth and order while, in turn, allowing this order to be projected as a temporal chronology of events. These texts authorize an official Sinhalese Buddhist history, a history that is common parlance in contemporary Sinhalese society.⁶

On the one hand, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist rhetoric is understood as a claim to have access to an *essential* Sinhalese national identity, as an ontological dynamic prior to its lived experience. The demonic realizes its violent potential in postcolonial Sinhalese nationalist rites and rhetoric against the Tamil other through the invocation of mythic history. On the other hand, these nationalist and violent uses of the metaphor of the demonic do not flow inevitably from the Pali Chronicles, as shown in an anti-sorcery ritual in which “demons are rendered impotent, transformed into harmless – virtually friendly – figures of fun...” (Kapferer. 1991: xii-xiii). In the Sinhalese rituals of healing the beneficent power of the Buddha ultimately resubordinates the disordering power of the demonic. In relation to debates about constitutional reform, the demonic potential of the Tamil other to fracture the unitary State has often been mobilized as a means of countering the potential for progressive reordering and reterritorialization of the State.

Decentering the State

This Chronicle tradition along with a wider corpus of Pali and Sinhala literature indicates the consolidation of a Sinhalese consciousness in the medieval period (10th - 15th century) and the

⁵ The cosmic order, the domain of the gods, is only one of many ontologies of being that condition the daily Sri Lankan social imaginary. It is this specific ontology of being that I focus on in this essay.

⁶ In the narrative of the later Chronicles (the *Culavamsa* and the *Rajavaliya*) from the 14th – 16th century the metaphor of the demonic is increasingly occupied by the Tamil (Hindu) other, who is both inside and outside of Sinhalese society, as manifest in the early Buddhist-Hindu polities.

middle period (16th - 19th century) of Sri Lanka's recorded history.⁷ This was a consciousness that indeed reveals distinctive processes of 'othering' authorized by Sinhala and Pali textual practices. In practice however – and following the logic of encompassment rather than exclusion – the Sinhalese Buddhist polities revealed a capacity to incorporate the outsider/the other who came from South India, albeit in a prescribed hierarchical relation. Notwithstanding this hierarchical process of transformation, in practice, these precolonial polities gave rise to highly decentred constitutional practices that implicitly drew on the non-bounded nature of the cosmic order.

Sri Lanka's current historical dilemmas have to be contextualised against the background of colonial policy. British policy in the middle half of the 19th century was characterized by a transition from types of administration rooted in ideas of sovereignty to one based on more diverse forms of governmentality. It is against the background of these new techniques of governmentality which were "organised as an activity designed to produce effects of rule" (Scott, 1999: 25) that Sinhalese Buddhist identity and the idea of a modern and yet ancient Sinhalese Buddhist nation begins to take shape. The consequence of this was that the past was increasingly (mis)read through the bureaucratic logic and imperatives of the colonial present. The stories of Sinhalese-Tamil conflict recorded in the Pali Chronicles were disarticulated from their mythic and cosmic structure. By doing so they were given a contemporary urgency in the modern construction of a Sinhalese Buddhist nation which in this imagination embodied and refracted the ancient Sinhalese Buddhist nation of the Pali Chronicles.

Under the auspices of Buddhist Studies, texts such as the Pali Chronicles were subjected to a rereading that sought to validate the mytho-historical stories they presented for their truth-value. Such an approach collapsed the epistemology of positivism into a hermeneutic of the precolonial in Sri Lanka. It failed to recognise that the "affairs of violence of the chronicles are part of mythic/cosmological arguments" (Kapferer, 2001: 46) which were only "obliquely related to actual political events in the past" (ibid. 46).

The genius of the Sinhalese Buddhist reform movement was its capture of the tools of positivist historiography. They systematically denuded the rural Buddhism of the Sinhalese masses, of its cosmological and ritual base and re-imagined it as rational, logical and scientific within an Orientalist frame that privileged religious, racial and linguistic markers of identity. What emerged was an amalgamation that, drawing on the institutional and literary forms of Protestantism has being classified as Protestant (or Modernist) Buddhism. Protestant Buddhism secularized the ethical framework of Buddhism and through it the Buddhist revivalist movement was able to look "to the past for evidence that their faith provided an effective base for action in the modern world" (Rogers in Spencer (ed). 1990: 94).

Myth, customs, and rites which all had localised origins, were thus transformed into the emblem of a *unified* ethnic identity. To this extent only, my argument is in agreement with postcolonial critics who emphasize the constructed nature of Sinhalese Buddhist identity. Sri Lanka's postcolonial education system has being an important vehicle for the propagation of this account of Sinhalese identity in both the village schools of the Sinhalese heartland as well as the middle class Buddhist schools of Colombo. As a significant medium for the transmission of identity (the '*Mahavamsa* mindset'), the education system needs to develop a curriculum that brings the tools of critique to bear on the teaching of history in the Sinhalese South. Rather the rich existential claims of Sinhalese myth should be unpacked as something which can be interpreted on its own terms, rather than as something which (re)presents the origins of the Sinhalese people.

It is necessary to undo the damage done by the Orientalist project of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which racialised Sinhalese and Tamil identity. The comparative linguist, Max Muller

⁷ See Roberts (2004).

had given popularity to the term 'Aryan' in the context of an Indo-European group of languages centred on North India as opposed to the Dravidian languages of South India.⁸ At times however he conflated the language with an Aryan 'race'.⁹ By 1885 Rudolph Virchow had articulated the concept of the *Sinhalese race* and by "the end of the century the identity of the Sinhalese and Tamil speakers had taken on a *racial* dimension" (Tambiah. 1992: 131, fn.5, his emphasis).

Muller did a vault face on his linguistic race claims before he died possibly anticipating the racist nightmare of National Socialism. Gananath Obeyesekere has noted that "[m]ost of the languages of North India and...Sri Lanka, are Indo-European offshoots of the languages of these early settlers [from the central Asian steppes]. However, even during the period of the Buddha, in the sixth century BC, miscegenation had been complete and the term Aryan ceased to have any racial connotation" (ibid., my interpolation). Yet Sri Lankan Government web sites such as the one of the *Sri Lankan Army* glibly refer to the Indo-Aryan settlers who first settled the island. This is historical illiteracy writ large, given the implicit racialisation of the category, but it's one that pervades into Sinhalese society. The Army web site even states that "Sri Lanka was not a mere variant of an Indian prototype but something distinctive or autonomous though the Indian element was never totally obliterated. Nothing contributed to this more than Buddhism". The dominant Indian variant that impacted on Sri Lanka was Indian Buddhism and so the cultural connection with India could not be more fundamental!¹⁰ Neither the Army web site nor the *Ministry of Education* web site makes reference to the profound impact of South Indian Tamil Buddhism on the island.¹¹ The *Ministry of Education* web site also overstates the North Indian connection.¹² These lacunae in the Sinhalese historical imagination need to be urgently challenged if Sri Lanka is going to generate the cultural resources that are a prerequisite for a tolerant State structure that respects 'difference'.

A patient excavation of the past reveals a whole host of resources that concerned Sri Lankan's can draw on in relation to articulating a justification for decentralized cum federal forms of government. The argument in favor of the decentralization of power from Colombo has historical precedents, which are much more ancient, that contemporary recourse to say debates that resulted in either the Indian or Malaysian Constitutions.

There is enough archaeological and textual evidence to indicate that both Sri Lanka's and mainland South East Asia's precolonial States were essentially decentralised *galactic polities*. Through the overarching principles of Buddhist kingship these *galactic polities* established a link between the domain of the gods and the domain of material existence. In their spatial and constitutional functioning, these polities, which established a binary relationship between Buddhist kingship and the cosmic order, were non-centralized entities echoing the Ashokan model of State in the 4th century BCE. They were pulsating entities so that within "each major or

⁸ (Kemper. 1991: 200, fn.15).

⁹ (Poliakov. 1971: 213-14).

¹⁰ <http://army.lk/history.php>. The impression projected is not that the Sri Lankan Army exists to protect the State, but a particular almost phantasmatic construction of the 'motherland', a Sinhalese (Buddhist) motherland, which no minority community can identify with. The task at hand then is to begin the process of restructuring the armed forces so that they reflect the ethno-cultural diversity of Sri Lanka.

¹¹ <http://www.moe.gov.lk/modules.php?name=Content&pa=showpage&pid=2>. This web site even makes a farcical claim to date the year in which the Buddha achieved *nibbana*!

¹² More disturbingly for a web site that extols the impact of Buddhism, no mention is made of the Tamil script Buddhist text from the 6th century, the *Manimekalai*, a text that links South India with Sri Lanka (see Monius. [2000]: 195-223).

minor principality, there were checks and balances such as duplication within administrative 'departments', interlocking and contesting factional formations of patrons and clients, and devolutionary processes of power" (Tambiah. 1992: 173).¹³

Drawing on the cosmological order of Buddhism "center-oriented space [was] fundamental to the geometrical design underlying the galactic state" (Tambiah. 1976: 112, my interpolation). There is indirect evidence from the Pali Vinaya, which suggests that, the vast Ashokan Empire far from been a centralized monarchy was more likely to have been a "galaxy-type structure with lesser political replicas revolving around the central entity..." (1976: 70). These polities were anything but bureaucratic hierarchies.

Their organizational form has, I speculate Buddhist scriptural justification. In the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* (*The Lions Roar of the Wheel Conquering King*) the Buddha extols that a *cakkavatti* king on conquering new territory should tell his vassals to "continue to govern as you did before" (cited by Collins. 1996: 429). H.L. Shorto notes that in both Burmese and Indian thought there was no idea of how to extinguish a conquered territory "as a sovereign entity, or to annex it in the modern sense" (cited by Tambiah. 1976: 111). We can speculate that the Buddha in the *Cakkavatti Sihanada Sutta* was voicing what appears to be a conceptual problem in Hindu-Buddhist political thought at the time. The decentralized bureaucratic order of the galactic polity was in a speculative mode given Canonical import by virtue of the devolutionary imperative that the Buddha attributes to Buddhist kingship in the shadow of conquest. In the shadow of conquest the Buddha recaptures the ethical import of *karma* by virtue of his blue print for devolved government if not by design then at least by accident.¹⁴

These Buddhist arguments in favour of a decentralised cum federal Sri Lankan polity depend on a radical transformation in Sinhalese (Buddhist) public space. A reinvigorated public space needs to both deconstruct and then reconstruct the tropes of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism. It is the profoundly un-Buddhist nature of Sinhalese nationalism that the discursive community in Sri Lanka has to unpack before the task of critical reconstruction of the Sri Lankan past can begin

This process of re-imagining the Sri Lankan past must be one that is attuned to the fundamentally hybrid nature of Sri Lanka's history. This story of hybridity is reinforced by the *Mahavamsa* itself which records that *Vijaya*, the mytho-historical founder of the Sinhalese polity, as well as his immediate entourage married into the royal house of Madurai in South

¹³ See Tambiah (1976: 110-11).

¹⁴ In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the last of the Sinhalese kingdoms, Kandy, reflected this diffuse cosmological order both at the level of geography and administration. Its geographical construction mirrored the 'world of the gods.' (Duncan. 1990: 107). To the extent that the ontological horizon of the cosmos oriented the Kandyan landscape 'its architects (the rulers) were seeking to partake of the power of the gods....' (Roberts. 1994: 67). In terms of administration the 'royal domain surrounding the capital city of Kandy was made up of nine small districts...under the charge of officials called *rate mahatvaru*.' (Tambiah. 1992: 173). Around the central domain there were twelve provinces, "an inner circle of smaller provinces and an outer circle of larger and remoter provinces." (ibid. 174). Just as the authority of the Buddha is subject to fragmentation by the demonic forces that inhabit the margins of the cosmos, the authority of the king "waned as the provinces stretched farther away from the capital." (ibid. 174). In its actualisation the logic of the *cakkavatti* king gave way to "the decentralized locational disposition of the traditional polity and its replication of like entities on a decreasing scale – which constitute a galactic constellation rather than a bureaucratic hierarchy..." (Tambiah. 1976: 114, his emphasis). Further afield in the Indonesian archipelago the Javanese polity of Mataram between the 16th – 19th similarly was one in which "territorial jurisdiction could not be strictly defined by permanent boundaries, but was characterised by a fluidity or flexibility of boundary development dependent on the diminishing or increasing power of the center" (Moertono. 1968: 112). The result was that both the semi-periphery and the periphery were in "tributary relationships" with the center (Tambiah. 1976: 123).

India, with women they brought over from Madurai.¹⁵ From then on as Obeyesekere observes “patterns of royal marriage and mass immigration were wholly from South India, initially from the Tamil country and later (since the 13th century) from Kerala” (in Tambiah. 1986: EN. 3). The absence of Sinhalese *purity* is reinforced by the fact that the Karava, Durava and Salagama caste groups all have a genealogy that is essentially South Indian (Tamil and Keralian), these groups having migrated to Sri Lanka from the 13th century.¹⁶

The task of re-imagining Sri Lanka anew places a heavy burden on all, but it’s a task that we need to urgently pursue. If this paper opens up a space in which civil society activists and scholars can examine the way in which Buddhism and particularly the Ashokan State model may be reconceptualized as providing the intellectual resources for a federal State structure in Sri Lanka it would have served its purpose.

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¹⁵ Kemper (1991: 55).

¹⁶ Kemper (1991: 159), Tambiah (1986: 99-102).

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