Chronicle Contestations and Colonial Constructions: Consolidating Sinhalaness in Sri Lanka

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Shortly before the island's sixteenth parliamentary elections, Sri Lanka's Registrar-General informed local media on 22 July 2020 about a seemingly innocuous alteration to the nation's birth registration process. Explaining how future birth certificates would replace the "race" section with a general "Sri Lankan" category, the Registrar-General likely did not anticipate the ensuing firestorm which engulfed the island's public sphere. Heated debates filled social media and other online forums, while columnist Nadira Gunatilleke publicly lamented the change as a step towards "deleting the identity of the Sinhalese people" and "eradicat[ing] true Sri Lankan history with living historical evidence." Supporting the continued presence of the "race" category on birth certificates, she argued: "all people living in all countries in the world have their own race" thus "there should be a relevant box with the name 'race' in the birth certificate" for the majority Sinhalese community.[1] Yet just one day after the Registrar-General's announcement, the Sri Lankan government halted the planned change. At a news conference held to reassure the public, cabinet minister Wimal Weerawansa calmly explained that no one would be allowed to erase "the roots" of the Sinhalese people.[2]

This furore lays bare the very real tensions between exclusive ethno-racial and inclusive national identities which exist in Sri Lanka today. In the Sinhalese language, the

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[1] Nadira Gunatilleke, "Another Yahapalana trap revealed," *Daily News*, 27 July 2020. For a sample of the bitter verbal exchanges in Sinhalese following the Registrar-General's decision, see Jayantha Samarakoon, "Uppana Sahathikaya Aluth Weyi," *Lankadeepa*, 23 July 2020.

[2] Easwaran Ratnam, "Wimal intervenes to reverse decision on new 'Sri Lankan' birth certificate," *Colombo Gazette*, 23 July 2020.

word *jāti/jātiya* connotes not just ethnicity and race, but also nation, people, and caste.[3] K.M. de Silva argues that its "semantic slippages" permit the mapping of cultural, linguistic and religious differences along a singular, overbearing lens of race thus resulting in the idea of a multi-communal nation being "incomprehensible" to most and a "meaningless abstraction" to many.[4] Anthropologist Arjun Guneratne writes that most islanders agree that the Sinhalese and Tamil communities share historicized cultural practices and beliefs but still maintain that "they are two separate peoples with different roots" in the subcontinent.[5] Stanley Tambiah concurs, adding that they "have come to be divided by their mythic charters and tendentious understandings of their pasts."[6] Investigating that which consolidated "Sinhalaness" or indeed "Tamilness" and "Muslimness" on the island thus becomes a question of how historically mixed, multicultural communal groupings have come to imagine monoethnic racial geographies, histories, and identities. Understanding Sinhalaness as that which relates to the formation and nature of the Sinhalese identity, this paper will explain how the convergence of colonial and modern constructions of the Sri Lankan past with narratives from the island's ancient mytho-historical chronicles provides a meaningful explanation to this central problematic.

While disagreements arise over the questions of precisely *when* and exactly *how*, scholars agree that the island's current ethno-racial identities are clearly constructed. The issue, according to E. Valentine Daniel, is that some of this "constructedness" is "easily revealed" while that of some others "persists in its conspicuousness."[7] Gananath Obeyesekere argues that communal identity formation is an ideological process that is unique for every society, and, as the birth registration controversy highlights, communal

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[3] K.M. de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka* (London: C. Hurst, 1981), 512; Jayadeva Uyangoda, "Ethnicity, Nation and State Formation in Sri Lanka: Antimonies of Nation-Building," *Pravada* 3 (1994), 13. Anthropologist Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake argues that the same is true of the Tamil language in "Identity on the Borderline: Modernity, New Ethnicities, and the Unmaking of Multiculturalism in Sri Lanka," in Neluka Silva (ed.) *The Hybrid Island: Culture Crossings and the invention of identity in Sri Lanka* (London: Zed, 2002), 57.

[4] de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 512.

[5] Arjun Guneratne, "What's in a Name? Aryans and Dravidians in the Making of Sri Lankan Identities," in Silva (ed.) *The Hybrid Island,* 20.

[6] Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5.

[7] E. Valentine Daniel, *Chapters in an Anthropology of Violence: Sri Lankans, Sinhalas and Tamils* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 14.

identities are an on-going source of contestation and affirmation.[8] Given its open and concealed characteristics, anthropologist Anton Piyarathne argues that it is both difficult and impractical to examine Sinhalese identity formation exclusively through an instrumentalist, modernist, or primordial lens.[9] Explaining its development solely through atavism, as the legacy of political manipulations during both the colonial and modern era, or as the by-product of postcolonial economic change and competition is again too simplistic. Beginning with the debate between historians R.A.L.H. Gunawardana and K.N.O. Dharmadasa concerning an archaic Sinhalese identity, this article will also explore the effects of the colonial encounter on this identity and the impact of post-independence events on its evolution, thus describing the ancient, colonial, and postcolonial experiences that have shaped its long-term trajectory as a potent phenomenon to the present day, helping to explain not just *how* and *when* Sinhalaness was consolidated, but also *why*.

The Sinhala of the chronicles: Sinhalaness in the pre-colonial period

As an ideological process, the evolution of a collective Sinhalese consciousness is both historically determined and historically limited. Therefore, the need arises to situate the contrasting conceptions of the Sinhalese identity in an appropriate historical setting. The term *Sinhala* (from the Pali *Sīhaḷa*) and its referral to the island "on account of the lion" first appears in the *Dīpavaṃsa* historical chronicle, attributed to the fourth and fifth centuries CE.[10] With both the Indian cleric Buddhaghosa referring to the island as a *Sīhaḷadvīpa* (island of lions) and the visiting Chinese monastic Faxian describing it as the "country of lions" in the fifth century, derivations of *Sinhala/Sīhaḷa* also appear to have quickly gained a wide currency abroad. [11] D.B. Jayatilake and K.R. Norman argue that Sinhalese began developing its independence from Sanskrit and other Indian languages

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[8] Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism, Nationhood, and Cultural Identity: The Premodern and Pre-colonial Formations, Volume I* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2004), 41.

[9] For an overview of the difficulties in using instrumentalism, modernism, and primordialism to explain the development of race and ethnicity in Sri Lanka, see Anton Piyarathne, *Constructing Commongrounds: Everyday Lifeworlds Beyond Politicised Ethnicities in Sri Lanka* (Nugegoda: Sarasavi, 2018), 18-31.

[10] R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, "The People of the Lion: The Sinhala Identity and Ideology in History and Historiography," in Jonathan Spencer (ed.) *Sri Lanka: History and the Roots of Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 45-47.

[11] Ibid., 45, For even earlier alleged mentions of *Sinhala/Sīhaḷa* in literary works from China and north India, see K.N.O. Dharmadasa*, Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness: The Growth of Sinhalese Nationalism in Sri Lanka* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 19-20.

as early as the third century BCE with the process reaching fruition between the fourth and eight centuries CE.[12] With graffito from the eighth century CE at Sigiriya referring to the island as *Heḷa Div* rather than the Pali *Sīhaḷadvīpa*, it is evident that the conceptualization of a Sinhalese identity was present by the late Anuradhapura period.[13]

D.E. Hettiaratchi traces the derivation of *Heḷa* to denote the Sinhalese people from the tenth-century CE *Dhampiā Aṭuvā Gäṭapdaya*. An exegetical text, it explains that the *heḷa* language comes from the *heḷu* people who dwell on the island who in turn derive their name from King Sinhabahu who had killed a lion named Sīhaḷa. The text conveys further how immigrant Prince Vijaya was also called Sīhaḷa being Sinhabahu's son, with Vijaya's followers therefore also coming to be called Sīhaḷa.[14] Using the *Dhampiā Aṭuvā Gäṭapdaya* as evidence, Dharmadasa argues that by the tenth century, the dynasty, people, language, and island had all been identified with the Sinhalese in the national consciousness.[15] Examining the wider Vijaya story and its apparent synchronization with the introduction of Buddhism to the island, Gunawardana presents an alternative chronology to explain the consolidation of an all-encompassing Sinhalese identity; drawing from the sixth century CE *Vaṃsatthappakāsinī* commentary, he postulates that Sinhalaness then referred only to the Vijayan dynasty, its kingdom, and its people.[16] For Gunawardana, it is only from the twelfth century when Guruḷugomi writes the *Dharmapradīpikā* following almost a century of South Indian Chola occupation that "Sinhala" extends to denote a dynasty, island, its inhabitants, and their language.[17] In this

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[12] D.B. Jayatilake, *A Dictionary of the Sinhalese Language, Volume I* (Colombo: Government Press, 1933), ix; K.R. Norman, "The Role of Pali in Early Sinhalese Buddhism," in Heinz Bechert (ed.) *Buddhism in Ceylon and Studies on Religious Syncretism in Buddhist Countries* (Gottingen: Vanderhock and Rupert, 1978), 30-31.

[13] Dharmadasa*, Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness*, 20. The Anuradhapura Kingdom was in existence from the fourth century BCE to the eleventh century CE.

[14] Hettiaratchi describes the connections between the different terms used to denote Sinhalaness as follows: Sinhala > Sīhaḷa > Heḷa > Heḷu > Eḷu. Gunawardana also claims that the Tamil *Eḷam* and *Iḷam* to refer to the island can be etymologically traced back to the term "Sinhala". See D.E. Hettiaratchi, *Dhampiā Aṭuvā Gäṭapdaya* (Colombo: University of Sri Lanka Press Board, 1974), 6; Gunawardana, "The People of the Lion", 47-48. See also Anuradha Seneviratna, *The Lions And The Tigers: Religious & Cultural Background of the Sinhala-Tamil Relations* (Nugegoda: Sarasavi, 1999), 21-23.

[15] Dharmadasa*, Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness*, 20.

[16] For different versions of the Vijaya myth, see Gunawardana, "The People of the Lion", 48-57.

[17] Ibid., 46-65. However, Gunawardana concedes that the processes that the definition of "Sinhala" to refer to all Sinhalese-speaking inhabitants on the island could have started at an earlier date. Alan Strathern also posits that the term "Sinhala" could have been used to refer to "service castes" as early as the fifth century CE. See Gunawardana, *Historiography in a Time of Ethnic Conflict: Construction of the Past in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1995), 58; Alan Strathern, "Sri

denotation of the island's inhabitants and their language, the label thus definitively excludes the Tamil-speaking communities who had established extensive settlements during this Chola domination.[18]

Yet these textual attempts to chronologically create a collective Sinhalese identity run the risk of presupposing the existence of a "pure" Sinhalese culture at some point in the distant past. Guneratne highlights how cultures are "fragmentary things" with the unity imputed to them "essentially arbitrary", and so the possibility of a Sinhalaness existing as a "pure whole" is thus fundamentally misleading.[19] Indeed, the island's chronicles – of which there are no equivalents in neither Tamil nor wider Indic historiography – appear to clearly dismiss just such a notion.[20] The *Mahāvaṃsa* reveals how Vijaya rejects the autochthonous Kuvaṇṇā in favour of a Pandyan princess from the South Indian polity of Madurai. An analysis of the *Mahāvaṃsa*'s marriage records, including its depiction of the Buddha's genealogy, also underscores how South Indian terms defined the island's kinship system.[21] Furthermore, the later *Cūḷavaṃsa* heaps praise on the Polonnaruwa Kingdom's last monarch, Parākrama, for adhering to the political precepts of the mythical progenitor Manu despite his origins as a Tamil-speaking Pandya who had earlier usurped the throne during the thirteenth century.[22] A close reading of these chronicles therefore portrays an island history that is simply too complex to be reduced to a binary opposition of the Sinhalese versus an "other" of South Indian origin. This is not to suggest that there

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Lanka in the Long Early Modern Period: Its Place in a Comparative Theory of Second Millennium Eurasian History," *Modern Asian Studies* 43, 4 (2009): 835 (n.74) For alternative views regarding the chronological origins of the Sinhalese people beyond Dharmadasa and Gunawardana, see Elizabeth Nissan and R.L. Stirrat, "The Generation of Communal Identities," in Spencer (ed.) *Sri Lanka*, 20-22 and John D. Rogers, "Historical images in the British period," in Spencer (ed.) *Sri Lanka*, 95-99.

[18] Seneviratne argues that there is no firm evidence of any Tamil-speaking settlements in Sri Lanka until the second century CE. He posits that it is only in the tenth century that evidence from the island's chronicles and inscriptions shows the existence of established Tamil-speaking communities on the island. See *The Lions And The Tigers*, 61.

[19] Guneratne, "What's in a Name?" 21.

[20] Alan Strathern, "The Digestion of the Foreign in Lankan History, c.500-1818," in Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (eds.) *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History* (London: U.C.L. Press, 2017), 219.

[21] Gunawardana, "The People of the Lion", 56; Thomas R. Trautmann, *Dravidian Kinship* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 321. Seneviratne argues that the Pandyas were not "Dravidians" and were of North Indian "Aryan" origin. He identifies them with the Pandavas of the *Mahabharata* and claims they had migrated to South India before their involvement with the island. See *The Lions And The Tigers*, 23

[22] Guneratne, "What's in a Name?", 27. The Polonnaruwa Kingdom succeeded the Anuradhapura Kingdom in the eleventh century and lasted until the thirteenth century with the city of Polonnaruwa itself abandoned by the fourteenth century.

were then no differences between the different island communities, but merely that the forefathers of today's Sinhalese and Tamils had far more in common with each other than chronicle narratives suggest.

Indeed, the insular chronicles conceal as much as they reveal. De Silva argues that they are more useful "as an index" to the beliefs and conceptions of the island's ancient *literati* and elite than as a repository of facts on the island's earliest beginnings.[23] Despite Dharmadasa and Gunawardana alleging different timeframes for the creation of an all-encompassing Sinhalese identity, *Mahāvaṃsa* analysis also reveals how Sinhalaness served more often to divide the rulers from their subjects than to unite them. Nissanka Malla may have emphasized the importance of Buddhist kingship, yet his insistence that the island's kings be of his *kṣatriya varṇa* or ritual status appealed to a wider Indic normative tradition and status that few on the island could claim.[24] The *Mahāvaṃsa*'s high esteem for the kingly qualities of Polonnaruwa rulers such as Parākrama Pandya indicates further the emphasis of *varṇa* ideology in favour of ethno-racial ideology. Guneratne even makes the assertion that heroic Anuradhapura ruler Dutugamunu would have far more in common culturally with his Tamil-speaking nemesis Eḷāra than with the Sinhalese who today invoke his name as their cultural ancestor.[25] Despite Dharmadasa and Gunawardana dating an inclusive Sinhalaness, in theory, to either the Anuradhapura or Polonnaruwa periods, there also exists no evidence that any ruler of these periods regarded themselves as a Sinhalese monarch ruling a Sinhalese ethno-racial realm.[26] Before the arrival of the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, Sri Lanka thus appears to have had the trappings of a generally harmonious multi-ethnic island polity without the strife that marked its later pluralism.

Colonialism and the "Sinhalacization" of linguistic and religious identities
Both Dharmadasa and Gunawardana concur that colonialism forced an extensive transformation of the Sinhalese identity to that of its present form. Colonization certainly

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[23] de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 6.
[24] Strathern, "The Digestion of the Foreign in Lankan History, c.500-1818", 230.
[25] Guneratne, "What's in a Name?" 38.
[26] For an overview of the debate concerning whether any insular king controlled the entire island during the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa periods, see de Silva, *A History of Sri Lanka*, 13-16.

did not invent the modern Sinhalese or Tamil labels, yet the need to incorporate islanders into a concrete political structure resulted in significant upheavals to island life. Under the Portuguese, sociological differences first emerged between the Sinhalese-speakers of the maritime areas and those who resided in the still independent Kandyan highlands. For instance, Sinhalese architectural styles in the low country gradually disappeared, and the costume of low-country Sinhalese women was also abandoned in favour of the Portuguese-inspired long-sleeved *kabakuruththuwa*. Under the later influence of the puritanical Dutch, cuffs, lace collars, frills, and hemlines further distinguished low-country Sinhalese sartorial styles from those of the Kandyans.[27] When exactly islanders began referring to themselves as "Buddhists" or "Hindus" remains uncertain, but perceptions of difference followed the introduction of Catholicism to coastal areas and temple desecration at sites such as Munneswaram and Kelaniya. The steady outflow of Buddhist monks and patrons from the low country to Kandy throughout the Portuguese and Dutch periods highlighted the "dark age" awaiting the practitioners of both faiths on the island.[28] These early sociological differences among the Sinhalese preceded another exercise in differentiation during the period of British administration.

Conquering the highlands, the British also organised a system of census enumeration during the nineteenth century. The *varṇa* system had evolved into occupational-based caste identities over the centuries, but "Sinhalese" and "Tamils" superseded caste groupings as official classificatory categories from 1824.[29] Bernard Cohn argues that the British defined and expropriated Indian culture and traditions to make Indians look like Indians. [30] Yet in Ceylon, the British emphasized the specificity of the "different" communal groupings rather than a uniform Ceylonese identity. "Kandyan"

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[27] Lorna S. Dewaraja, *The Kandyan Kingdom of Sri Lanka, 1707-1782* (Colombo: Lake House Investments, 1988), 8; Nira Wickramasinghe, "From Hybridity to Authenticity: The Biography of a Few Kandyan Things," in Silva, *The Hybrid Island,* 86.

[28] David Scott, "Dehistoricising History," in Pradeep Jeganathan and Qadri Ismail (eds.) *Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1995), 106-36; Nira Wickramasinghe*, Sri Lanka in the Modern Age: A History of Contested Identities* (London: Hurst, 2006), 22-23.

[29] Wickramasinghe*, Sri Lanka in the Modern Age*, 51.

[30] Bernard S. Cohn*, Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge. The British in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 121-127. For a further overview on how the caste system functioned in colonial India, see Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

and "Low Country" labels officially defined the Sinhalese whereas the "Ceylonese" and "Indian" labels qualified the island's resident Tamil and Muslim populations.[31] A Foucauldian means of controlling the unfamiliar, arbitrary classifications served only to freeze and distort often overlapping and adaptable outward identities. Indeed, until well into the nineteenth century, South Indians continued to migrate to the island. Just as Sinhalese speakers in the north had become "Tamilized" following the fall of the Polonnaruwa Kingdom, the South Indian migrants underwent "Sinhalacization" and "Buddhicization" elsewhere on the island.[32] The South Indian lineages of the current Sinhalese Durava, Karava, and Salagama castes and Sinhalese family names such as Hettiarachchige with its reference to the South Indian Chettiar mercantile caste, are both a testament to this reality.[33] These official Sinhalese and Tamil labels only served to propagate the notion that these enumerated categories were fixed rather than fluid and definitive rather than suggestive.

Furthermore, linguistic classifications became racialized during British rule. While Max Müller, Sir Herbert Risley, and other intellectuals hypothesized the common racial origins of "Indo-Aryan" language speakers, Robert Caldwell and other orientalists developed similar theories for "Dravidian" language speakers. Though "Sinhalese" and "Tamil" may have previously been "porous sieves" through which diverse categories of peoples passed, these orientalist ideas were applied to demarcate boundaries between the island's Sinhalese-and Tamil-speaking communities.[34] Scholars debate whether insular Tamils embraced their Dravidian classification, but agree that the Sinhalese readily connected their supposedly Aryan origins with the Vijayan arrival narrative.[35] Indeed, contrasting "barbaric" colonial rule with the "paradise" of a supposedly halcyon Aryan past, Anagarika Dharmapala raged how the "Aryan Sinhalese" had suffered from

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[31] For a full list of census classification categories during the British period, see Wickramasinghe*, Sri Lanka in the Modern Age*, 51-52.

[32] Piyarathne, *Constructing Commongrounds*, 22; Strathern, "Sri Lanka in the Long Early Modern Period", 834.

[33] Nissan and Stirrat, "The Generation of Communal Identities", 23-24.

[34] Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*, 6.

[35] While Daniel suggests that insular Tamils did not have a comparable response to the Sinhalese "Aryan" moment during the nineteenth century, Wickramasinghe and Hellmann-Rajanayagam refute his argument. See Daniel, *Chapters in an Anthropology of Violence*, 26-27; Wickramsinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age*, xv; and Dagmar Hellmann-Rajanayagam, "The Politics of the Tamil Past," in Spencer (ed.) *Sri Lanka,* 114-118.

association with the "most cultured of all the European races."[36] Buddhism and Sinhalese women were also drawn into this narrative. In the plays *Daskon Nātakaya*, *Sirisangabo Charitaya* and *Sri Vickrama Rajasinghe*, playwright John de Silva glorified a hegemonic status for the Sinhalese people, their language, and their traditional Buddhist faith. Casting actress Annie Boteju as an exemplar of the Aryan Sinhala woman, de Silva and dramatists such as Charles Dias helped to forge a Sinhalese consciousness that inculcated pride in this Aryan identity.[37] As the island advanced into the twentieth century, a potent trinity of religion, race, and nation had thus begun to mature.

Nonetheless, the primacy of the Aryan narratives was challenged during the British period. In his 1852 *Sidat Sangarāva*, Sinhalese Christian James D'Alwis argued for the existence of an indigenous Sinhalese classical literature devoid of Sanskrit and Indic borrowings. [38] Maraimalai Atikal began an Indian *tanittamil* movement to free Tamil from English and Sanskritic corruptions, and Cumaratunga Munidasa started the *Hela Havula* collective in 1941 to similarly purify Sinhalese.[39] Renaming himself Cumaratungu Munidas, he also urged usage of supposedly pre-Vijayan "Hela" words and advocated a new "Hela Triple Gem" in which he placed language before religion to transcend confessional differences between Sinhalese Buddhists and Christians.[40] The *Hela Havula* arose amid growing negative attitudes towards India due to influxes of cheap labour, but the collective could not effectively counter the linguistic scholarship from Buddhist monastic establishments and the discourse of an Aryan people, their faith, and their nation.[41] With Dharmapala's Buddhist revivalism converging with D.B. Jayatilaka's purist temperance movement and the archaeological "rediscovery" of Anuradhapura and

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[36] Anagarika Dharmapala, "Message of the Buddha," in Ananda Guruge (ed.) *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala* (Colombo: The Government Press, 1965), 34; Anagarika Dharmapala, "History of an Ancient Civilization," in Guruge, *Return to Righteousness,* 482.

[37] Neloufer de Mel, *Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001), 57-68.

[38] Dharmadasa*, Language, Religion, and Ethnic Assertiveness*, 47-62.

[39] See K. Kailasapathy, "The Tamil Purist Movement: A Re-Evaluation," *Social Scientist* 7, 10 (1979), 23-51.

[40] Sandagomi Coperahewa, "Purifying the Sinhala Language: The Hela Movement of Munidasa Cumaratunga (1930s–1940s)," *Modern Asian Studies* 46, 4 (2012), 881-883.

[41] Ibid.; Nira Wickramasinghe, "Citizens, Aryans, and Indians in Colonial Lanka: Discourses on Belonging in the 1920s–1930s," in Michael Laffan (ed.) *Belonging Across the Bay of Bengal: Religious Rites, Colonial Migrations, National Rights*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 139-158.

Polonnaruwa, a popular narrative emerged that emphasized the continuity of the Sinhalese people with ancient Aryan Sinhalese glories.[42] A legal case in 1922 ruled that the "Kandyan" and "Low Country" Sinhalese did indeed belong to the same race, and in 1931 the Donoughmore Constitution introduced universal suffrage to the British colony.[43] "[C]ultural" and "political" Sinhalese identities were thus forced to fuse and other British-inspired Sinhalese genealogies appeared to find a new form following independence in 1948.[44]

Postcolonial Sinhala identity: cosmopolitan capitalism or sectarian socialism?

The British believed certain races inhabited certain insular geographical spaces and that each race was worthy of legislative representation.[45] Yet with universal suffrage, political elites realised that capturing the majority Sinhalese voting bloc alone guaranteed electoral success. Keenly aware of this, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike achieved a landslide electoral victory in 1956 by winning over the *pancha maha balawegaya* or "five great forces" of traditional Sinhalese society.[46] Following Bandaranaike, politicians positioned themselves as protectors of Sinhalese culture at every opportunity lest the *balawegaya* of Buddhist clerics, Ayurvedic physicians, teachers, labourers, and farmers criticise them as elitist Anglophiles.[47] Initiated in the 1960s, the Mahaweli Programme with its resettling of Sinhalese peasants in the former heartland of the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa Kingdoms also exemplified a need to connect with past Sinhalese glories.[48] However, when successive United Front and U.N.P. governments during the 1970s and 1980s discriminated against Tamils in university admissions and civil service recruitment,

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[42] Rogers, "Historical Images in the British Period", 101.

[43] Nissan and Stirrat, "The Generation of Communal Identities", 30.

[44] For a further discussion of the fusion of "cultural" and "political" Sinhalese identities, see Strathern, "The Digestion of the Foreign in Lankan History, c.500-1818", 232.

[45] Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 146. For an overview of how this racialised geography also resulted in the crystallisation of a distinct Tamil-speaking Muslim identity during the colonial period, see Dennis McGilvray, "Arabs, Moors, and Muslims: Sri Lankan Muslim Ethnicity in Regional Perspective," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 32, 2 (1998), 433-483.

[46] S. Arasaratnam, "Nationalism in Sri Lanka and the Tamils," in Michael Roberts (ed.) *Sri Lanka: Collective Identities Revisited*, (Colombo: Marga Institute, 1998), 48-52; Piyarathne, *Constructing Commongrounds*, 48-52.

[47] Harshana Rambukwella, *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity: A Cultural Genealogy of Sinhala Nationalism* (London: U.C.L. Press, 2018), 69.

[48] Jonathan Spencer, "Introduction: The Power of the Past," in Spencer (ed.) *Sri Lanka*, 10.

militants finally took up arms in 1983. Discontentment with market reforms and neoliberalism also compelled many Sinhalese youths to join the anti-government J.V.P. during its 1971 and 1987 insurgencies. Political scientist Rajesh Venugopal argues that these events enabled the conflict between "cosmopolitan capitalism" and "sectarian socialism" which characterises the island's society today.[49] Indeed, despite the 2009 L.T.T.E. defeat, polemics continue between those who seek economic progress through inclusive growth models and those who want development along majority Sinhalese and Buddhist axes.

Conclusion

At present, there is an overwhelming Sinhalese-speaking Buddhist majority on the island. A close examination of the island's ancient texts and an analysis of the impact of roughly four centuries of colonialism on group identity formation help to explain the processes which have led to this reality. Tendentious readings of the past first formulated during the colonial period have served to favour race and religion over *varṇa* and caste and have thus trifurcated what was once a multicultural and diverse island polity into a nation-state where tripolar Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim identities dominate. Rajasingham-Senanayake aptly describes Sri Lankan history as a "hall of mirrors" where memories of an ancient and noble past compete with the "selective forgetting" of a culturally mixed and shared heritage.[50] Ethno-racial identities may well be recent constructions, but, as Tambiah emphasizes, once crystallised they do not easily dissolve.[51] Rebuking the Registrar-General's plans for the birth registration process, Gunatilleke insisted that "there will be no Sri Lankans" until there is "one law, one judiciary system, one type of school" and "the same food, [and] same type of clothing" for all islanders.[52] The fallout from this proposed birth registration change thus explicitly highlights how Sinhalaness in Sri Lanka today is trapped between those who wish to perpetuate its exclusivity and those who seek to involve it within an inclusive

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[49] Rajesh Venugopal, *Nationalism, Development and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge Press, 2018), 42.
[50] Darini Rajasingham-Senanayake, "Identity on the Borderline", 41.
[51] Tambiah, *Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy*, 128.
[52] Nadira Gunatilleke, "Another Yahapalana Trap Revealed," *Daily News*, 27 July 2020.

framework of national accommodation. Whatever the next chapter in the consolidation of the Sinhalese identity, contestation and disputation seem certain to follow.

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