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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, OCTOBER 26, 2013, Vol. 48, No. 43 (OCTOBER 26, 2013), pp. 91-100

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23528845>

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# Producing the Present

## History as Heritage in Post-War Patriotic Sri Lanka

NIRA WICKRAMASINGHE

Today more than ever, nostalgia permeates heritage practices in Sri Lanka. The return to heritage in myth-building and historicisation is a process that was not born in the post-civil war years but received more state sanction in the ideological setting of a triumphant Sinhala-Buddhist state victorious over un-national secessionist forces. The paper focuses on the production of a hegemonic heritage discourse, mapping briefly the parties involved, and exploring heritage in practice as a site of contest.

The state – actually a shifting complex of peoples and roles...

– Herzfeld (1997: 5)

Walter Benjamin warned against the “appreciation of heritage”, describing it as a greater “catastrophe” than indifference or disregard (Mathur 2007: 168). Indeed, heritage can be considered an essentially present-centred cultural practice and an instrument of cultural power. It is as much about the production of the present as it is about the reproduction of a past.

The changing fortunes and popularity of places and sites indicate that no site is inherently valuable as heritage. There is therefore no heritage per se and all heritage, as Laurajane Smith argues, is intangible (2006: 3). What make sites valuable are the present-day cultural processes and activities that are undertaken around them. It is through these constitutive cultural processes that things and places are identified as possessing meaning and value. As we will see in the case of post-civil war Sri Lanka, the choice in valorisation reflects contemporary cultural and social values, debates and aspirations (ibid: 3).

What then is the hegemonic discourse of heritage “which acts to constitute the way we think, talk and write about heritage”? (ibid: 11). This paper will explore the way this discourse has evolved in a post-war situation and the extent to which it has validated a set of practices and performances that inhabit popular, expert and state constructions of heritage.

For the purpose of clarity, and although I recognise that this formulation does not sufficiently take into account overlapping trajectories, I would like to argue that there are at least two main routes to the past: history and heritage, which share many commonalities but differ in a fundamental way. The purpose is not to idealise history as the true, pure method of inquiry and exposition of the past. Records of the past are indeed filtered by time and what are bequeathed to us are only a few traces. Few would contest the fact that there is no objective history where the voice of the author does not haunt the narrative. Most historians who admit that they cannot be objective at least try to be impartial. But where historians differ from producers of heritage is in their appreciation of the past as a truth that while imperfect and unachieved, is yet more a truth than a faith or belief, fixed and devoid of ambiguities. Mostly, the historian tries to convey a past open to inspection and proof following certain protocols recognised by all members of the guild. But as Chakrabarty (2000: 29-36) has shown, there are many knowledge asymmetries in the academic

The author thanks Marina Carter, Anup Grewal, Sanayi Marcelline, Nilu Abeyratne and Sasanka Perera for their thoughtful reading of the original draft of this essay which enabled her to sharpen many of the arguments made here.

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world, with scholars from the South unable to access the data produced in the North and often expected by journals and publishers to refer to works by western authors while the converse is not demanded.

Today more than ever, nostalgia permeates heritage practices in Sri Lanka. This paper will first look at the return to heritage – a process that was not born in the post-civil war years but received more state sanction in the ideological setting of a triumphant Sinhala-Buddhist state victorious over un-national secessionist forces. It will then focus on the production of a hegemonic heritage discourse, mapping briefly the parties involved, and exploring in the final section heritage in practice as a site of contest. The paper concludes with some suggestions on possible ways of overcoming the weight of heritage.

### Return to Heritage

In the new post-conflict patriotic state, President Rajapaksa promised there would no longer be minorities in spite of the fact that the idea of a multicultural society was embodied and endorsed in the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution of 1987. In the new “civic nation” of the president’s speech, citizens/patriots would be ethnically undifferentiated, although he seemed to hold out the promise that all religions and ethnic identities would be respected. The idea of a civic nation is commendable but utopian. As Partha Chatterjee has argued, any attempt to construct “one people” involves marginalising some (Chatterjee 1995). Furthermore, all examples of civic nations – the us or France are cases in point – have anchored their liberal principles to a particularistic legacy. The new patriotism enunciated in President Rajapaksa’s speech also has little in common with the post-national or constitutional patriotism, which has been theorised as an alternative form of loyalty compatible with universal values but distinct from and superior to nationalism. It has little in common even with a civic patriotism that recognises that the public sphere cannot be neutral (Canovan 2000). On the contrary, the president’s vision merges nation and state and promotes a love of country based on a particular reading of the history and foundation myth of the Sinhala people, where all other groups – those formally known as minorities – are present merely as shadows and not as constitutive elements of a common political culture.

Today’s obsession with heritage in post-civil war Sri Lanka offers many parallels with the narrative reconstruction of the past that was promoted by an influential group of Sinhala literati of the early-20th century, who were located in an anti-colonial milieu critical of British rule yet partaking in the country’s immersion into a market society. There has been, in the last few years, a singular but clearly identifiable phenomenon in the public sphere which I would qualify as a “return to heritage”. This return has, moreover, been accompanied by a sharp decline in professional history’s popular relevance and national appreciation, which was evident during the time of G C Mendis who wrote textbooks for schools as well as articles for the research community, and was translated into vernacular languages. Globalisation and external enemies in the 21st century, just like internationalisation and colonial rule in the

early-20th century, have spawned a particular form of cultural response that sees a retreat from the teleological world history of the immediate post-Independence decades. Heritage today plays a function similar to that played by myth a century ago: it appears to be apolitical, consensus-based, and formulates a seemingly unproblematic reading of the past. The other moment when heritage came to the fore as a state-endorsed discourse using nostalgia to legitimise the path of market-oriented development, was in the decades following the 1977 opening of the economy under the United National Party (UNP).

### The Beginnings: Myth, Heritage and History

The first decades of the 20th century witnessed in colonial Sri Lanka two principal routes of recounting the past that were sometimes distinct, evolving along parallel lines, while at other times were closely intertwined with one another. They can, for convenience sake, be called the historical path and the heritage path. Proponents of both modes of recovering the past affirmed that they conveyed a truth about the past, although they used very different strategies to reach their conclusions. The first group composed of amateurs and then professional historians were explicit about their craft and methods and attempted to write an objective exposition of the past open to inspection and proof according to the accepted canons of the profession. The second group also made truth claims, but these were not supported by the type of evidence that professional historians would have considered as acceptable sources.

The emergence of a discourse about heritage can be traced to the beginnings of anti-colonial stirrings in the late-19th century and the growth of a national consciousness in Sri Lanka. Notions of authenticity were central to the growth of anti-colonial ideas, but the contours and features of the authentic varied considerably in time and space. Among the Sinhala-Buddhist literati, there was, in the late 19th century, the idea of an authentic past that was grounded in the age-old hydraulic civilisation of the Rajarata. This dominant vision of the land of kings coexisted with the idea of an authentic for the present or “for the immediate” founded on Kandyan signs and symbols. Interestingly, the Kandyan heritage was not superseded by the Mahavamsian dominant discourse of the nation but remained entrenched in the material culture of the peoples. In the colonial period, as today, there were clearly different registers of heritage, assuming different roles and functions. Perceptions of authenticity differed according to which community, religion, region and class one belonged to. Many Tamils from the Jaffna peninsula, for instance, harboured a sense of heritage founded on affinity with south India, which was quite different from the sense of history and chronology grounded in the foundational book of the Sinhalas, the *Mahavamsa*.<sup>1</sup> But among Tamils too, there would have been a sense of history, just as a sense of heritage or culture existed among Sinhalas (Daniel 1996: 34).<sup>2</sup> Alongside these visions of the past, existed many others: for instance, Christians’ and Muslims’ sense of the authentic past was deeply embedded in the history of their own faiths, a history external to the island in which they lived.

By the early-20th century, the idea that there was a great and unbroken Sinhala past was widespread even among the non-literate classes.

### Modern Histories

In the early 20th century, the heyday of heritage as a mode of accessing the past, the discipline of history, as it is understood today, was still in its teething stage. The mid- and the late-19th century was dominated by the oeuvre of a former colonial secretary, Sir James Emerson Tennent (1859), whose first volume *Ceylon*, offered a near exhaustive narrative of the history of the island from the earliest times to the establishment and consolidation of British rule. Less known is William Knighton's (1845) *The History of Ceylon from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*. While Knighton accepted the events described in the Chronicles as factually correct, Tennent was more sceptical about some of the stories depicted in the *Mahavamsa*. A number of anglicised Sri Lankans followed the tradition begun by Tennent and Knighton, and produced histories of the island that often challenged some of the readings by British authors. James de Alwis' (1823-78) *Sinhalese History*, was never actually published – a few of his chapters were serialised in newspapers – but he can be considered the first modern Sri Lankan historian (de Silva 1978: 1-12). In the Sinhala language, Dodanduwa Piyaratne Thero's text of 1869 is considered the first textbook in Sinhala published for a non-monastic Buddhist school. Its content is revealing: following the core lessons that concern teaching the alphabet, guidelines to other lessons are included. They deal with ethical and spiritual dimensions of Buddhism, establish Buddhism against the teachings about one single god (creator god), criticise non-Buddhists, offer moral advice, criticise other value systems and urge people to protect Buddhism from threats of *mithyadrushti* (false belief) (Sri Lanka National Archives, 5/63/150/(7)). There is no mention of historical figures, historical events, or periodisations in this particular text, where the student is invited to admire and emulate the Buddha rather than kings and heroes from the island.

In the early-20th century, historical writing was represented by textbooks for schools, such as Louis Edmund Blaze's *A History of Ceylon for Schools* (1900) and the works of amateur historians such as Donald Obeyesekere (1911), or Ponnambalam Arunachalam (1906). In the 1930s, a new generation of professionally-trained historians emerged, among whom were Paul Pieris, Fr S G Perera, H W Codrington and G C Mendis. Mendis, in fact, can be considered the scholar who established history as an academic discipline in Sri Lanka. His thesis clearly departed from the mythic histories of Anagarika Dharmapala and his epigones, who took as incontrovertible facts the enunciation of the Chronicles. The reliability of the *Mahavamsa* was put in perspective: "Though it is on the whole reliable from the first century BC, it contains far too few details from the writing of history to satisfy modern requirements" (Mendis 1966: 75-76). In 1941-42, with the publication of Colvin R de Silva's *Ceylon under the British Occupation 1795-1833*, the discipline of history was firmly grounded in the rules

of truth and verifiability shared by historians in the western tradition of academic knowledge (Rogers 1990; Codrington 1939; Mendis 1932; Pieris 1913/14). From this time onwards, heritage and myth-based histories were relegated to a lesser domain of credibility and acceptance.

In Jaffna in the 1930s, we can also see a shift in the writing of history. Here the filtering in of new epigraphical south Indian sources changed the character of histories that had been mainly based on mythical chronicles, such as the *Yalppana Vaipava Malai*. Since the late-19th century, the linguistic terms Aryan and Dravidian had been used in India to qualify people speaking languages that stemmed from Indo-European or Dravidian families. In Sri Lanka, Tamil writers began to refute the claims of some members of the Sinhalese literati of superiority based on their purported belonging to an Aryan race by using the term Dravidian (*Tiravitam*), to denote a place – the South – and a language as a race.<sup>3</sup> An array of sources was mustered to emphasise quite forcefully the preponderance of Dravidians and Tamils in Sri Lanka from ancient times (Wickramasinghe 2006: 258-60). As Hellman Rajanayagam points out, C Rasanayagam's *Ancient Jaffna* suggests that Sinhalese are a mixture of indigenous people, Aryans and Dravidians, and that Tamils are very closely related to the Sinhalese. Tamils, he argues, have been living in Jaffna from times immemorial (Hellman-Rajanayagam 1995: 71).

### From Nostalgia in the Development Discourse to Heritage

From the 1930s onwards, when a measure of self-government was granted to the crown colony under the Donoughmore constitution, there was an underlying nostalgia for a bygone age where the peasantry was proud, prosperous, and embodied all the values that the modern age had destroyed. The post-colonial state invested heavily in restoring ancient irrigation tanks in the North Central Province areas, constructing new dams in the south-east (Gal oya and Welawe ganga); and finally, the large-scale project of organising the Mahaweli river and its affluent that started in 1968. The purpose of the project was not purely economic. Developmental discourse was enmeshed with nationalist underpinnings that emphasised the centrality of the Sinhala peasant, who became a "sublime object" in the popular ideology. In the state ideology of the UNP government, which introduced a new economic policy based on economic liberalisation and an export-led economy, development through irrigated agriculture achieved a prominent place: as a reincarnation of the ancient, indigenous and Buddhist culture of Sri Lanka's golden age. The minister of Mahaweli development in the UNP regime, Gamini Dissanayake, declared quite candidly in 1983, "the soul of the new Mahaweli society will be cherished values of the ancient society, which were inspired and nourished by the Tank, the Temple and the Paddy Field" (cited in Tennekoon 1988: 297).

The rural bias of politicians was not new: it had begun in the early-20th century, when a first generation of nationalists, looking for an issue that would give legitimacy to their claim to be "representatives" of the people of the colony, found it

convenient to champion the cause of the peasantry, who had suffered from dispossession of land in the plantation areas. What was new after 1977, however, was the use of the state apparatus and the services of the business community to construct an image of society where the tension between the traditional and the modern was tactically mediated. The UNP regime was conscious that the modern development it was going to usher in had to be culturally mediated in order to be accepted by a fundamentally rural population. Newspaper and television advertisements made explicit references to the age-old local cultural practices of the people, who were always represented by members of the Sinhalese majority community (Kemper 2001: 62).<sup>4</sup> Hennayake's work has shown that the agro-technology and insurance sectors were particularly involved in this process of embedding development in the past. She cites the text from the advertisement of a fertiliser company from the post-1977 period:

Agriculture is a part of Sri Lankan heritage, its culture and tradition. Our ancient kings were inspired agriculturists. Our people here, from the time immemorial, combined an affinity for the earth with a talent for innovative technology. Anglo-Fert and Anglo-Chem are two companies who share a corporate commitment to the growth of agriculture in this country (Hennayake 2006: 123).

The UNP government was responsible for requesting the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) to provide guidance and assistance in managing the archaeological sites in the regions containing the three ancient capitals of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy in 1978. Two years later, the director general of UNESCO, when appealing internationally for the funds necessary to safeguard the Cultural Triangle, reminded his interlocutors that "The Cultural Triangle...must be preserved for the sake of the world at large because it forms an integral part of man's heritage" (cited in Silva 2005: 222). As both examples show the purpose of the state was to display its commitment to the deepest values of the nation in spite of pursuing an economic policy that called in all the "robber barons", as President Jayewardene flippantly declaimed. Its dominant discourse was more and more embedded with a sense of the pastoral care of the material past, which would give the government the self-assigned right to radically alter the present. As Michael Herzfeld points out:

The static image of an unspoiled and irrecoverable past often plays an important part in present actions. It legitimises deeds of the moment by investing them with the moral authority of eternal truth and by representing the vagaries of circumstance as realisation of a larger universe of system and balance (1997: 206).

While the patriotic modernists of the early-20th century defined their ancient past as heritage in order to create pride in the nation in the making, and the liberal developmental state of the late-1970s used heritage to strengthen their claim to moral authority to transform an agrarian society into a market-oriented export processing zone, the post-civil war state of the 21st century is using heritage for a purely political purpose, that of depoliticising its citizenry and muting any possible dissent. The construction of the present

discourse is a process in which a number of different actors are involved.

### The Construction of the Present Hegemonic Discourse

**Education:** A number of actors, institutional, individual, state, non-state, local and international, contribute to the creation of a discursive field called heritage that, I will argue, has gradually merged with what is generally known as history. This new discursive field of heritage is shaped through a number of discernible mechanisms: acts and practices of knowledge-creation about heritage, authentication of heritage through legislation and policing, giving value and taking away value through the politics of funding, and transforming heritage sites or objects through concrete acts of conservation.

**Education in Heritage:** As Bourdieu has argued, educational structures aim at producing social agents worthy and capable of receiving the heritage of the group and capable of transmitting it in turn to a larger group (Bourdieu 1994: 6). Education in Sri Lanka is free at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. In 2010 there were 39,32,722 students following a primary and secondary education (Data Management Branch, Ministry of Education 2010). A principle manner in which ideas about heritage are conveyed to a large public is through teaching in the school, university and *Daham Pasala* (Buddhist Sunday school), and through textbooks. Indeed, textbooks provide a fairly accurate reflection of the manner in which history as critical assessment about the past has been superseded by a version of history that conveys a flat, uncontested and unproblematised story of the past (Siriwardena, Bastian, Indrapala and Kottegoda 1980; Wickramasinghe and Perera 1999). This process is not a recent one but has gained momentum after the war against the secessionist movement in the north and east entered its last and bloodiest phase.

In Sri Lanka, there has been a kind of obsession with history that explains why history textbooks have been so controversial. Until the 1990s, governments of the left and the right believed in the state's responsibility to produce a unitary text. Researchers at the National Institute of Education (NIE) and other commissioned authors wrote texts that conformed to the syllabus and to the directives of the ministry. Now, with the privatisation of production, anyone can produce a textbook. But, in the open textbook market it is still the same individuals who create knowledge for millions of children, the only difference being the fact that the authors are paid by publishers rather than the state and collect royalties on their books. Issues pertaining to heritage are introduced in history textbooks and Buddhism textbooks. History is now a compulsory subject up to the Ordinary-Level examination, and a cursory look at the texts produced by the NIE confirm the emphasis on monumental histories associated with royal lineages. History as a subject that interprets the past rather than glorifies it, is unrecognisable in these textbooks, which offer children a narrative of the glorious days before invaders from India and colonial powers shattered the equilibrium of society ushering in modernity.<sup>5</sup>

Alongside grade-school history books, the syllabi and texts used for teaching Buddhism in Daham Pasala, should be looked at as one of the main sites of transmission of ideas about heritage to a younger and often gullible generation. The textbooks from grade 1 to grade 11 for Buddhist Sunday school are printed by the Department for Buddhist Affairs. Until 1961, it was the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA), which had established a national network of Buddhist Sunday schools that provided printed texts and other educational resources (Gombrich 1998: 185). Later, successive government ministries took over this responsibility. Even a quick scrutiny of the present Daham Pasala texts that contain sections on Sri Lankan history are revealing of certain trends. Just as in school histories, important and *shrestha minissu* (great individuals) are mentioned for their roles in promoting Buddhism. The history of Buddhism appears as one peppered with glorious deeds and exceptional individuals. It is a history full of omissions and chosen emphases, one which resembles the heritage/mythic mode of recounting the past rather than modern historiography.

The term "history of the sasana" or Buddhist order itself merits scrutiny, as it provides an alternative frame of reference to the same period in time that is taught in schools through the trope of the nation state in the making. Obeyesekere (2006) who initially refrains from borrowing a term from the western lexicon to qualify this sense of imagined community that existed in premodern times, has argued that premodern polities were "structurally disparate, yet ideologically imagined as a unified Buddhist 'whatever'". This "whatever", he later shows, can be encapsulated in the term "sasana", a Buddhist community created and imagined through different practices of concretisation, among which, the pilgrimage was central. Clearly, a student of the Daham Pasala is being imparted with a notion of the past as the history of the sasana rather than that of the nation state, a past made of feats performed by great individuals, monuments built to concretise their greatness, and actions that have served to consolidate the kings' special relationship with the Buddhist sasana. If heritage is about the meanings placed upon artifacts or other traces and the representations that are created from them, what is dispensed in Daham Pasala, or Buddhist Sunday school, is a heritagised version of history, insofar as the representations are presented as evidence that cannot be contested or questioned.

### Universities

At the University of Colombo, where I taught for nearly 20 years, student Buddhist monks in search of reassurance and certainties about a fictional, unmoving national culture in a world in constant flux, frequently opted for the study of history as an Honours course. They were, of course, disappointed to find that the courses we offered did not deal with history as heritage but rather turned all the preconceptions they held about the monastical history of the Chronicles upside down. History, as we taught it, was conceived precisely as the opposite of heritage studies. But this is not always the case in all the university departments of history, archaeology, heritage

studies, Pali and Buddhist studies where notions of the past are being fashioned.

There is, therefore, no uniformity in the content of knowledge on history and heritage imparted by these various institutions. Content depends on the type of programme from which it emanates and the individual lecturer's own interpretation of what needs to be valorised. A common feature is, however, that this content functions as "expert knowledge", hence accompanied by an aura of legitimacy and sanctity.

Apart from universities, other institutions strengthen the experts' credibility as bearers of the power to determine what needs to be preserved or ignored from the past, by calling upon them to act as consultants. There are a number of ministries and government departments directly involved in the definition, production and preservation of heritage: the Ministries of Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs, of Culture and the Arts, of National Heritage; the Archaeological Department, and those of the National Archives, National Museum, Buddhist Affairs, Christian Affairs, Hindu Religious and Cultural Affairs, Muslim Religious and Cultural Affairs and Cultural Affairs and Educational Publications. These institutions earn their power and credibility by displaying their activities in the print and audiovisual media, and by otherwise making themselves visible before the public eye.

In addition to government ministries, a number of statutory bodies and non-state actors are concerned with particular aspects of heritage, either through teaching, research or funding conservation. These include the Central Cultural Fund (CCF), the Galle Heritage Foundation (GHF), the National Art Council (these might cover non-tangible heritage), the National Crafts Council (NCC), the National Performing Art Centre, and the UNESCO National Commission. Many experts sit on a number of these commissions, thus creating a self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating message on heritage that consolidates its own foundations rather than questioning them. Power and credibility are earned by these institutions in various ways as they target different audiences through a variety of projects.

Finally non-state actors play a considerable role in generating interest in heritage issues, among them the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka (RASSL), National Heritage Trust, Dutch Burgher Union (DBU), Archaeologists Association, local branch of the International Commission on Museums (ICOM), and the local chapter of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS).

### Vying for Popular Appeal

The realm of popular culture has always been inhabited by accounts of history that have drawn from the chronicles, myths, and Jataka tales, and portrayed heroes and gods as the motors of history rather than in terms of social forces or class conflict. In postcolonial Sri Lanka, the gap between academic histories written in English and histories in the vernacular is not new, but was accentuated with the opening up of the economy and the emergence of a cosmopolitan class consuming

western modernity with a vengeance after a decade of austerity under Sirimavo Bandaranaike. The vernacular domain of culture had various layers, but a large group of people soon became adepts of an entertainment industry that pandered to their need for reassurance at a moment when the nation was threatened by secessionist anti-systemic groups. The trend became more pronounced in 2008, when the state began a full-scale patriotic war to reconquer the East and the North from the Tamil rebels. In August 2008, the movie *Aba* was released in 38 cinemas across Sri Lanka. Counting the number of viewers in all cinemas screening the movie, leads to the impressive figure of 21,05,000, that is about 10% of the total population of the island. *Aba* was a production of E A P Edirisinghe, a group of companies that owned a popular tv channel called Swarnavahini. The film was directed by a popular film actor and tv personality named Jackson Anthony, and depicted the life of King Pandukabhaya, some 2,400 years ago. Pandukabhaya was the first king of Anuradhapura and according to the Chronicles, ruled for 70 years.

In 2008 television programmes with a historical slant also began to be aired at peak times. Among these, the *Maha Sinhale Vansa Kathava* (the great Sinhala chronicle) with Jackson Anthony as the anchorman, was the most popular. The programme brought together a panel of “experts” who discussed an event of Sri Lanka’s past, generally in a narrative and emphatic style. Among the members of the panel there was sometimes an academic historian, but his/her interpretation was drowned by the dominant narrative of praise for the great feats of the kings and people of the past.<sup>6</sup>

In all these creative works, the tropes are the hydraulic civilisation and the aesthetic of the gargantuan. What is portrayed is not the past but Sri Lanka’s fame, which is related to its past ability, for instance, to build stupas that are deemed exceptional mainly for being the largest brick structures known to the premodern world. Buddha statues too are admired less for their aesthetic value than for the fact that they compare in size with the Maligawila 17th century statue, 11 metres in height and considered to be the “largest free standing Buddha figure” (see Tourism Sri Lanka website, tourism-srilanka.com). Monumentality is a central value in the production of heritage by state, business, journalists and consultants. The connection with the present is implicit. Today’s patriotic state needs the “signatures of the visible” (Appadurai 2008) to construct a national imagination. Creative works, monuments and archaeology, as such “signatures of the visible”, create heritage products that consolidate national identity and the profile of certain political figures.

Fictionalised versions of the past for adults and children are also vehicles of a heritage discourse that draws on and naturalises certain narratives and, cultural and social experience, often linked to ideas of nation and nationhood. Historical novels are in great vogue. Jayantha Chandrasiri’s novel, *The Great Dutugemunu* (*Maha Dutugemunu*), which relates the glories of a third century BCE Sinhala hero who slayed the Tamil King Elara and recaptured the kingdom of Anuradhapura, is soon going to be made into a film.

Today, it is clear that the public idea of what constitutes the past is fashioned in a vibrant commercial environment where publishers, authors, film and teledrama makers, using the print media as well as visual technologies and the internet and harbouring Sinhalese nationalist ideas, reproduce the monumental, most often exclusive, personality-oriented vision of the past as heritage that the state apparatus is conveying through educational institutions. This vision is, however, contested on occasions by dissenting views among the hegemonic discourse, as well as by members of communities that are excluded from this dominant vision.

### Heritage in Practice: Contests and Dissent

The past that was written about by professional historians in academic books and peer-reviewed journals and presented to fellow historians in academic congresses, is today performed as heritage for a wide and democratic public. The transformation of history into heritage must also be understood as its transformation from a selective and individualistic practice into a public performance that takes many shapes through acts such as visiting, interpreting and especially managing and conserving.

### Ideologies in Spaces: The Contest over the Meaning of Sites

One initiative of the Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (SLTDA)<sup>7</sup> is the Ramayana Trail, which takes people to 52 sites related to the epic, including the garden where the abducted Sita was imprisoned by Ravana. The Tourist Board started this initiative in 2007, the aim being to attract tourists from India in search of an authentic historical experience. In 2009, after the civil war ended, 4,000 Indian tourists arrived and numbers have been growing since.

The Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka (RASSL), especially its director, Susantha Goonetilleke, were vehemently against what Goonetilleke saw as a resurrection of a fictional trail based on no historical evidence, for purely commercial reasons. In a letter to the minister of tourism, society members denounced the trail as “a total travesty and a future danger for the territorial integrity of Sri Lanka as there is no historical evidence whatsoever about Rama and Ravana”. The Tourist Board was castigated as having fabricated inscriptions for the consumption of gullible tourists (*Hindustan Times* 2009). There were other reasons apart from the championing of evidence-based historiography that led RASSL to denounce the Ramayana Trail. Among these were a fear of a growing Indian influence in the country and anxiety that the *Ramayana* story, if taken as fact, appeared to confirm an Indian presence predating the arrival of Vijaya and the founding of the Sinhala people.

S Pathmanathan’s position epitomised that of the academic community vis-à-vis the trail: “I do not doubt the historicity of Ram. But the sites have no connection to the epic. I do not think there is any evidence (to connect). One should not mix history and literature” (*Hindustan Times* 2009). Unlike in India, where there was often collusion between the interests of scholars associated with the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) and popular histories, a forum strongly supported by the

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Sangh parivar, in Sri Lanka, historians even of a nationalist cue disqualified certain claims to knowledge as not being “proper scientific knowledge”. In Sri Lanka, the Ramayana Trail controversy shows that a filtering of useful and unthreatening myths is done by protectors of the patriotic nation state, who do not hesitate to enlist positivist history to debunk the claims of a heritage narrative that does not conform to the dominant vision.

### Contest over Place/Sites

Heritage is, to a certain extent, about the promotion of a consensus version of history by state-sanctioned cultural institutions and elites to regulate cultural and social tensions in the present. It can also, however, be a resource to challenge the stasis and the received values by subaltern groups. As such, it can be a progressive notion, a way of reworking meanings of the past, challenging the ways people and things are perceived. It can be about negotiating new ways of being and expressing identities (Smith 2006: 4).

Sites and landscapes provide the terrain for these conflicting claims to meet. Memory indeed requires a display, an articulation in objects or representation to give it meaning. The peculiar power of landscapes is inherent in the fact that they are visual, material forms. Materiality makes them appear neutral as mere traces of history. In Sri Lanka, the origin of historical landscapes is rarely questioned, they become naturalised. For example, who would contest the notion of a sacred city and Anuradhapura’s claim to such status? The politically-laden and socially-conditioned processes that actually produced the landscapes are obscured.

The post-conflict state has taken a determined stance in the consolidation of a notion of glorious national heritage through various performances.

A recent example is Kandarodai, a place in the Jaffna peninsula where a collection of circular structures was discovered in the early-20th century, on a megalithic site possibly dating from the early part of the second millennium. After the end of the civil war, pilgrims began to visit the place again and its name was subsequently Sinhalese as Kandurugoda, while the structures also were refashioned as stupas. Through this reconnection with the Buddhist past of the North, what was being contested was the entire Tamil nationalist historical narrative. Today, this could fuel tension between communities as they battle over the cultural meaning of this place. Unlike the case of the Ramayana Trail, the stupas appear to offer concrete evidence of a Buddhist past, further strengthened by an inscription naming the place Kandurugoda. This serves Sinhalese claims that Buddhism encompassed the entire island, the stupas being dated to the ninth century AD, a period similar to Boro budur in Indonesia (de Silva 2002). Tamil scholars have acknowledged the Buddhist remains in Jaffna, described as “burial monuments of monks, a Buddhicised version of megalithicism”, as proof of the existence of Tamil Buddhists in ancient times (Parameswara 1999: 123-24). Sinhalese nationalist Ven Ellawalla Medhananda is championing the renovation of all Buddhist sites in areas “desecrated”

by decades of civil war: his book describes sites in Anuradhapura, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu districts (Medananda 2008). In the post-conflict period that began in 2009, Tamils felt the patriotic state was investing much in renovating traces of Buddhist heritage in the north and east as well as building new temples, while the Hindu heritage they subscribed to was being neglected:

Buddha statues have been found in places like Kandarodai, and this shows that Tamils have followed Buddhism and that Tamil Buddhism was practiced in Eelam, in a lesser extent, but the Sinhalese show these as Buddhist antiques and claim parts of the Tamil motherland as Sinhala areas (*Global Tamil News*, September 2011).

Tamils are countering with similarly grandiose claims of a “Great Stone Age” in Kandarodai, using new media to disseminate their ideas (*Global Tamil News*, June 2011).

Another potential geopolitical zone of conflict is the Jailani sufi shrine, 22 kilometres south-west of Balangoda, a predominantly Sinhalese area also known for being the home town of the Ratwatte family, one of the leading political dynasties of Sri Lanka. The area is the site of a devotional cult of Shaykh Muhiyadeen Adul Qadir (AD 1166), who is believed to have visited the popular cave, which now houses a mosque at Kuragala, while on a pilgrimage to Adam’s Peak and meditated there for 12 years. The site was rediscovered in 1875 and a festival began to be celebrated by the Muslim merchant community in Balangoda from 1890. The site is made of three large stone formations, one being the Kappal Malai, which resembles the prow of a ship, and at the base of which an open air mosque was erected in 1922. From the 1970s, there emerged claims by Sinhalese nationalists, based on the presence of second century Brahmi inscriptions, that Jailani was actually an ancient Buddhist archaeological site and that this heritage needed to be preserved. The state gave sanction to these claims by allowing the MCA<sup>8</sup> to construct a small *dagoba*, just above the spot where the sufi saint is said to have meditated. In spite of the Jailani trustees’ success in obtaining cabinet orders to limit the height of the construction, the Department of Archaeology (DOA) erected a sign claiming that Kuragala was the site of a Buddhist monastery (McGilvray 1998: 433-83, 2004: 273-89). Kuragala appears now and then in the news as a potential site of dispute. As I write, a similar conflict has arisen in Dambulla over alleged illegal Muslim and Hindu constructions within the premise of the sacred city (Groundviews 2012).

Monuments and sites are thus being reinvested with new meanings, a phenomenon that existed in the past but that has been infused with a new urgency in a post-conflict situation where power relations between communities are being redefined. Each group is trying to test the limits of toleration of the others under the watchful eye of the patriotic state.

### The Contest over the Nature of Restoration

Protecting built heritage and restoring it according to certain agreed upon criteria is an idea that was born in Europe in the 19th century and travelled to Sri Lanka with antiquarianism and colonial archaeology under H C P Bell. In the postcolonial period, these principles were enshrined in a number of



international treaties, among which, the Venice Charter of 1964 is the most central instrument. The preamble of this seminal document indicates the underlying ideas about the past that prevailed in the day:

People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage. The common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations is recognised. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity (ICOMOS International website).

It is on this crucial issue of “authenticity” and the need to respect this feature when restoring monuments and sites that differences in interpretation between international organisations upholding these values and other parties who felt they had a trusteeship on the monument would occur.

In some cases, there is no clash between restoring a monument so that it resembles what it was in the past, creating a site that proves the grandeur of the past civilisations, and producing a site that can be a lived and used site by the people. As Jayatissa Herath of ICOMOS unambiguously states:

...Preservation is different to conservation so we focus on conservation; we try to restore a site to its past glory. There are some that make the argument that sites should not be changed but left as they are but in order to preserve it some things have to be done. Take the Ruwanwelisaya, it was not like this earlier, it is because of the restoration work that now it looks like it does now. But because of this restoration work people can also use it as a place of religious worship.<sup>9</sup>

The Temple of the Tooth or Dalada Maligawa, is believed by the Buddhist community to house the Buddha’s Tooth relic. The temple was constructed by King Wimaladharmasuriya (1593-1603) and is today under the control of two chief monks of the Malwatta and Asgiriya temples and a lay custodian (*diyavadana nilame*). The restoration of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy after a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) bomb destroyed part of it in 1998, offers a telling example of the local understanding of restoration as making anew. New tiles were laid, new *sandakadapahana* (moonstone) and new carvings were made, totally in contravention to the Venice Charter (ICOMOS 2004). The clash is here between the site of the temple as living heritage where people come to practise their rituals, and the World Heritage approach that stultifies places into fixed immutable things. The vision of the bhikkhus, as far as stupas and sites associated with Buddhism are concerned, is that heritage is a living thing that can be modified. Hence, the restoration of the Dalada Maligawa to look exactly as it looked before, even if it meant using present-day materials or the painting of ancient stupas in white, which is a common occurrence in Sri Lanka and thus made them similar to all other modern stupas in the country.

In 1986, when Prime Minister Premadasa announced his plan to build a “golden canopy” over the shrine room of the temple, his suggestion was opposed by many experts, including the director of the Sri Lanka DoA who argued that the canopy would not only put the building at risk but also damage the very “antiquity” of it. Its antiquity and authenticity were legitimised by the belief that there had not been any additions made to the temple since the last king of Kandy. The decision

by the representative of the state prevailed, however, and on 31 December 1987, a golden canopy costing Rs 20 million was unveiled by Premadasa. The sangha showed little concern with issues of authenticity or antiquity when they praised the construction of the canopy as a memorable and edifying act by a prime minister who, like the kings of the glorious past, worked in consort with the monks for the betterment of the country (Abeysekera 2002: 148-49).

## Conclusions

In Sri Lanka, as in most states which are signatories of international conventions, “heritage”, in its multifarious guises, is endorsed simultaneously by a global bureaucratic apparatus the UNESCO, a global tourist industry and national governments” (Askew 2010: 19). UNESCO’s rhetoric appears to be progressive in that it purports to protect world cultures by means of protocols, declarations and inventories. But World Heritage projects belong to a world system and world economy which is in no way contesting the way nation states exhibit and promote a certain version of the past. The power structures of the nation state and their endorsement of populist versions of the past are not challenged by international institutions. In that sense they protect the key instruments that perpetuate marginalisation of certain histories and dominance of the sphere of ideology and cultural symbolisation (ibid: 22). The state uses the frame of World Heritage sites for its own agenda of cultural hegemony and majoritarianism. The contradictions between nation state ideology, morphed into what I have elsewhere qualified as “new patriotism” (Wickramasinghe 2009: 1945-54) in the post-conflict years, and the lofty goals of UNESCO are rarely acknowledged by local representatives of UNESCO or members of ICOMOS. There are few voices left to dissent.

At a time when western thinkers have lost their legitimacy among the people of Sri Lanka, it might be strategic to reintroduce them to the thought of Rabindranath Tagore. Indeed, Tagore advocates that when a country is seen as morally transgressing, it forfeits its claim to the loyalty of its citizens. His contemporary, Leo Tolstoy, made the same point when he stated that one could be a critic while at the same time being a patriot. What both thinkers discredited was an extreme patriotism that entailed a belief in the superiority of

## Web Exclusives

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one's country and an exclusive concern for one's country (Tolstoy 1968). There is clearly in their thought virtue in disloyalty to one's country.

Tagore's low-key nationalism is certainly at odds with the type of state patriotism promoted by the Sri Lankan government during the final phase of the civil war and eventual victory against the LTTE. I have argued elsewhere that if the Rajapaksa regime takes patriotism seriously and expects non-Sinhalese communities to identify with a superordinate identity that transcends their attachment to a group, it will need to be sensitive to the ways in which certain expressions of "banal nationalism" can easily alienate cultural minorities. Continuing to flag Sinhala-Buddhist nationhood, a practice that started in the mid-1950s, might not be the most judicious way for the state to win over the hearts of members of other communities to the goal of civic patriotism.

How does Tagore's critique of the Janus face of nationalism and its corruptibility add to the seemingly infinite works on nationalism? What new insights does it bring to our understanding? Tagore's writing is, as Borges pointed out (cited in Guha 2010), steeped in general and real experiences. In that

sense, he is not a theoretician who has coined a new paradigm on the nation. Rather, he writes using a passionate tone to convey his main idea that worship of one group often means othering or contempt of an other. His is a virulent condemnation of the nation:

The idea of the nation is one of the most powerful anaesthetics that man has invented. Under the influence of its fumes the whole people can carry out its systematic program of the most virulent self-seeking without being in the least aware of its moral perversion (Tagore 1917: 25-26).

At this particular juncture when there is a reaction and rejection of ideas and notions nurtured in the west, from human rights to secularism, invoking Tagore is a kind of political blessing for ideas that were later endorsed by political philosophers of the late-20th century. It can legitimise a critique of heritage practices that would otherwise be brushed away as alien or irrelevant. Tagore's relevance is precisely his Asian location, his cultural insertion in a Hindu tradition – Tagore can critique caste and patriotism in south Asia precisely because he comes from Bengal. It is the situatedness of his critique of the nation and its rituals that is crucial, more than the novelty of his utterances.

## NOTES

- 1 According to the Vamsa literature, Sri Lanka is the *Dharmadvipa* (the island of faith) consecrated by the Buddha himself as the land in which his teachings would flourish. The *Mahavamsa*, a sixth century court chronicle states that on the very day of the Buddha's death, Vijaya – the founder of the Sinhala race – landed in Sri Lanka, as if to bear witness to the Buddha's prediction.
- 2 Valentine Daniel has argued that communities have different ways of approaching their past and therefore of writing their histories.
- 3 For a detailed account of the meanderings of the notion of Tamil race see Hellman-Rajanayagam (1995: 132-33).
- 4 Kemper has pointed out that only 5% of all advertisements portrayed minority communities.
- 5 I was Consultant, Ministry of Education on Curriculum revision for schools (Chairperson of History syllabus committee) 2005.
- 6 In the popular press it is no longer historians who discuss matters relating to the past but amateur historians who write without abiding by the protocols of the profession. Among these are Bandu de Silva, a former diplomat who frequently contributes to the English language newspapers *Island*, and *Daily News*, and Nuwera Eliya Hemapala and Ellawala Medananda who write for the Sinhala dailies.
- 7 Formerly the Tourist Board of Sri Lanka.
- 8 Formerly the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.
- 9 Interview with Jayatissa Herath, 19 October 2011.

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