



Harshana Rambukwella

The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity

A Cultural Genealogy
of Sinhala Nationalism

 UCLPRESS

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Front cover image: The image depicts a temple mural at the Kathaluwa, Ginivella Viharaya in southern Sri Lanka. Crafted by Dutch artists in 2007, the project faced criticism because of the use of 'low caste' models and the contentious claim they violated Buddhist mural conventions. The images were also vandalised. Source: Sathsara Ilangasinghe and Dr. Saumya Liyanage

Foreword

In this important and lucid book, Harshana Rambukwella offers us what he calls a ‘cultural genealogy of Sinhala nationalism’. The term ‘genealogy’ gestures towards Foucault and, before him, Nietzsche. At its broadest it suggests that attention to the flow of argument over time will destabilise our assumptions about what is given and what is deemed inevitable. Nationalisms struggle to tame the unruliness of history with the story of a stable subject – the nation – and its more or less inevitable emergence and triumph. The story of the nation, any nation, performs a kind of double trick with history: it details the emergence of a collectivity over time, while making that collectivity itself appear timeless, natural and unquestionable. Any critical engagement with nationalism therefore needs to question the apparently unquestionable, to de-naturalise the assumptions that might otherwise appear so self-evident.

This process is at once much easier but also much harder than it may first appear. What makes it easy is the discovery that any given nationalism is a zone of argument and internal contradiction; what makes it hard is that all those who would argue – about who is in and who is out of the nation, about how to protect, save or restore the nation – agree on one thing, that there is a nation that requires protecting, saving and restoring. The self-evidence of the nation as a frame of understanding and analysis is deeply embedded in academic as well as popular interpretations of history and politics. A genealogical approach to the history of this phenomenon offers one possible way out of what has come to be called the common-sense ‘methodological nationalism’ that treats nations and nation states as an obvious unit of analysis. To get any critical purchase on a topic like this the analyst has to find a way to break with that common-sense perspective, while nevertheless acknowledging the very powerful, often destructive, real-world effects of the idea of the nation. Understanding how a particular perspective on history is made to seem natural and unquestionable is not the same as arguing that it is somehow trivial or epiphenomenal.

The nation is a prime example of what the philosopher Ian Hacking calls an ‘interactive kind’. Most of our classifications of the world are what Hacking terms ‘indifferent kinds’: identifying a particular tree as a member of a particular genus matters not to the tree itself. The tree carries on in its tree-like way. In contrast, identifying a person as a member of a particular collectivity, whether on grounds of language, physical appearance or occupation, not only matters to the person but may also cause the person to act differently, to argue for or against the relevance of the classification in question, to query who else may be included or excluded. It may also generate attempts to identify some particular group of people, or some particular set of practices, as being more important than others in the identification and reproduction of the classification. Interactive kinds carry their own instabilities within them; one manifestation of this is a tendency to argue about the content and boundaries of the kind itself. Such arguments are often couched in a language of ‘authenticity’. Authenticity makes some biographies exemplars of the nation, makes some practices – how a particular song is sung in public, for example – especially significant in claims of stability and self-evidence.

Rambukwella’s book focuses on authenticity as a way to open up these arguments for the study of Sinhala nationalism in Sri Lanka. He starts from an apparently trivial example: a celebrated singer sang the right song, a song deeply identified with Sinhala nationalist values, in the wrong way at the annual Independence Day celebration in 2016. The singer’s mistake was to sing in the idiom in which she was trained, which is the Western classical tradition, rather than in a properly authentic Sinhala idiom. The result was a brief but fierce public scandal. The irony, from which Rambukwella’s argument takes off, is that both the song itself and the appropriately ‘authentic’ idiom in which it is expected to be sung have quite shallow and easily traceable histories. Authenticity, which is meant to be a sign of the givenness of nationalist practice, can be seen to be constructed under quite recent and quite specific circumstances.

From this point of departure Rambukwella takes us through the lives of three complex figures in the history of modern Sinhala nationalism. Two of them, Anagarika Dharmapala and S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, are familiar from previous analyses of Sinhala nationalism, one the enigmatic Buddhist reformer most often identified with cultural resistance to the British in the era of high colonialism, the other the equally enigmatic elite politician who ushered in a new era of populist nationalism in the decade after independence. The third, Gunadasa Amarasekera, is probably less well known to readers outside Sri Lanka. Although he is a major figure in Sri Lankan cultural life, very few of his books are available in

English, and the polemics and controversies that Rambukwella traces so illuminatingly were almost entirely conducted in Sinhala and confined within the bounds of what we might call the Sinhala reading public. This brings me to another irony – that the history of Sinhala nationalism has been almost entirely written without reference to material written and published in Sinhala. This is equivalent to writing a history of the French republic based only on English-language accounts. That it has been possible at all is of course an irony of the postcolonial condition, in which English remains the dominant language of academic analysis while Sinhala and Tamil are the languages in which the important political and cultural work goes on.

Rambukwella's familiarity with important debates about Sinhala culture conducted in Sinhala provides one of many original threads in this book. His critique of some well-known postcolonial theory for its lingering attachment to ideals of authenticity is another. The identification of something authentic, and potentially oppositional, 'outside' the logic of colonisation is a classic nationalist trope, reintroduced in recent decades by authors otherwise eager to assert their own oppositional position to both colonialism and to postcolonial forms of nationalism. In contrast, Rambukwella's book is not posited on some kind of analytic outside: when all's said and done, he is an active participant in arguments about culture, language and authenticity within Sri Lanka. Like all three of his central characters, he is attempting to navigate a course between the triumphalist claims of first-world liberalism and the tragically destructive pursuit of sectional nationalisms. His intervention effectively expands the conversation in two symmetrical ways: academic analysts need to attend more carefully to the arguments of nationalists, and nationalists might possibly learn something from the kind of comparative and critical perspective that Rambukwella brings to his book.

This may suggest that the importance of what Rambukwella has to say is limited to those with a pre-existing interest in the specific story of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and the tragic history of the Sri Lankan nation state. That is an important and interesting story in itself, but I think there are strong reasons for reading this book regardless of local interest. In the early 1990s, when the first wave of revisionist scholarship about Sinhala nationalism broke, it was possible for a distinguished Sri Lankan scholar to query the politics of the term 'nationalism'. Similar phenomena in Britain or the US may be glossed more positively as 'patriotic', whereas the 'nationalism' of the postcolonial world is frequently bundled together with pejoratives like 'chauvinism' and 'fundamentalism'. No more. Now both the US

and Britain are dealing with an upsurge of explicitly nationalist (not to mention fundamentalist and chauvinist) politicians. Russia and India are ruled by authoritarians who coolly combine gangster capitalism and hard-line nationalism to mobilise their support. This may all seem new and disturbing to a generation of liberal commentators unaware of the drift of actually existing democracy beyond Westminster or the Beltway. To writers like the author of this book, who have lived most of their lives under the shadow of unstable and often dangerous nationalisms, these phenomena are more familiar. There is much to be learned from Harshana Rambukwella's deeply thoughtful and always insightful book, wherever you are located and whatever you imagine your politics – and culture – to look like.

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All translations of quotations into English are mine.

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1

Authentic problems

Introduction

On 4 February 2016, internationally acclaimed Sri Lankan soprano Kishani Jayasinghe sang *Danno Budunge*, a song perceived as celebrating Buddhist values and culture, at a state-sponsored event held at the Galle Face grounds in Colombo to mark the 68th Independence Day celebrations. Her operatic rendition of the song, considered by some an ‘unofficial national anthem’, was thought masterful by some observers (Wickramasinghe 2016). But the next day there was a swift and crude cultural-nationalist reaction against Kishani’s singing. The strongest criticism was made on a popular Sinhala-language television channel, where the host compared Kishani’s singing to that of feline yowling and remarked that Sinhala villagers upon hearing this singing would throw stones at it. When Kishani’s international reputation as a soprano subsequently came to light, social media led an equally swift backlash against the television host’s comments. The channel offered an apology, and the host was fired. This was just the beginning of an intense, if short-lived, debate on Sinhala culture and the relative value of cultural cosmopolitanism versus insularity. Prominent Sri Lankan intellectuals, musicians and even the Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe, participated in the debate.

The *Danno Budunge* incident cannot be understood in isolation. It reflected an always contested cultural and political discourse concerning Sinhala authenticity, which has shaped much of Sri Lanka’s post-independence history. At the heart of this discourse lies the notion of *apekama* – loosely translating as ‘ourness’, or the idea that there are things that are authentically Sinhala and Buddhist. Much of post-independence Sinhala nationalist discourse has been informed by this notion of cultural exceptionality. The cultural coordinates of *apekama*

are debated hotly. They have rarely remained static, but one constant is the belief that something called *apekama* exists and that it is a national virtue with overarching unity. It is not simply idiosyncratic personal belief but a systematic discourse that has become institutionalised and is reproduced and transmitted from generation to generation. Disputing and debating *apekama* adds to its stock and shores up its cultural and political value. The ability to claim *apekama* is to be able to claim authentic Sinhala and Buddhist status. *Apekama* may be primarily a cultural discourse but its political effects have been significant and far reaching in post-independence Sri Lanka.

The history of *Danno Budunge* and the multiple influences that shaped the production and reception of this song over the course of the twentieth century pithily illustrate the protean life of authenticity. The song was first performed in the early twentieth century. It was made popular by John de Silva, an early twentieth-century Sinhala playwright who played a significant role in establishing the *nurti* dramatic tradition in Sri Lanka (de Mel 2001, 57). De Silva was known for the Sinhala and Buddhist content of his plays, which tapped into cultural-nationalist sentiments in Sinhala society in the early twentieth century. Many of the heroines of his plays idealised chaste values – signifying the ideal of a new middle-class Sinhala woman in the making (de Mel 2001, 58–60). Regulating women’s bodies, attire and behaviour was another important manifestation of authenticity in twentieth-century Sinhala cultural nationalism. De Silva’s plays were a site where these ideas about women gained visibility and popular circulation.

Although the content of de Silva’s plays was didactic and moralistic (Dharmadasa 1992, 128), his theatre was hybrid and drew upon multiple theatrical idioms. The ‘authenticity’ of de Silva’s plays was more in the ‘message’ than in the medium. The form of his theatre marked a time when a Sinhala cultural modernity was in its formative stages. It was inspired by and drew upon many influences, such as the *nadagama* folk tradition, the pan-South-Asian Parsi theatre deriving from India, and European realist theatre (de Mel 2001, 60–8; Field 2017, 22). *Danno Budunge* first featured in the play *Siri Sangabo*, about a pious Buddhist king in Sinhala historical lore. It was first produced in 1903, with a musical score by Vishwanath Lawjee, an Indian musician who collaborated on most of de Silva’s productions. Lawjee did not know Sinhala, and de Silva had to explain each scene to him in English so that he could compose an appropriate melody (Field 2017, 24). The origins of *Danno Budunge* thus underscore the irony of its later twentieth-century adoption as an authentic piece of Sinhala musical

expression. Kishani Jayasinghe's rendition was also not the first operatic rendering of the song. From the 1920s to the 1940s Hubert Rajapakse, a Sri Lankan tenor, sang the song in operatic style to appreciative audiences (Devendra 2016). This was a time when different discourses of authenticity jostled for influence. In de Silva's early twentieth-century theatre North Indian classical music was the major inspiration because of perceived affinities between North Indian culture and Sinhala culture, but in the 1930s the *hela* (indigenous) movement led by Munidasa Cumaratunga advocated a form of extreme linguistic and cultural purity, which denied any Indian influence on Sinhala culture. Cumaratunga extended these ideas to music (Field 2017, 39–42).

What was more or less a 'soft' cultural nationalism in the early twentieth century gained a more institutionalised dynamic in post-independence Sri Lanka. Particularly from the late 1940s onwards, with the political institutionalisation of Sinhala nationalism, many avenues of cultural expression became aligned to different degrees with exclusivist Sinhala sentiments. In music the 1950s saw the emergence of the *subhawitha sangeethaya* (the 'well made art song' or semi-classical song) tradition associated with the Sinhala service of Radio Ceylon (Field 2017, 5). At its outset it simply imitated Indian melodies and was more concerned with song as text than with its musical expression. But the 'art song' in later decades evolved to become a hegemonic genre in Sinhala music, which was associated with authenticity and *apekama*. Many of the musicians within this tradition were trained in India at the Visva-Bharati University in Shantiniketan, which was founded by Tagore, identified with the North Indian Hindustani 'great' tradition and promoted as the most suitable foundation on which to build modern Sinhala music. The promoters of this genre rejected Western musical influences as well as the South Indian Karnataka tradition. The 'art song' tradition was institutionalised both through state electronic media, which elevated it to a classical national musical style, and through the educational system, where music curricula were based on the Hindustani-inspired tradition.

The most iconic example of this tradition was the late Pandit W. D. Amaradeva, whose rendition of *Danno Budunge* became the definitive version of the song in post-independence Sri Lanka. For generations of Sinhala musicians and Sinhala musical connoisseurs, the Amaradeva aesthetic – its tonality, musical arrangements, melodic structures, choice of instrumentation and performative style – signified Sinhala identity and authenticity. Experimentation was not foreclosed entirely, but for music to be truly recognised as Sinhala it needed to conform to the cultural coordinates of *apekama*, which in turn were implicitly

authorised and upheld by 'guru' figures like Amaradeva and many others who followed in his footsteps, such as Victor Ratnayake, Nanda Malini and Sunil Edirisinghe. Amaradeva's funeral in 2016 was held with state honours, and a musical academy is to be established in his name. 'Distortions' of 'Amaradeva songs' usually come in for harsh criticism. Kishani Jayasinghe's singing at the Independence Day celebrations in 2016 essentially fell victim to this judgmental discourse of cultural authenticity.

The *Danno Budunge* controversy arose because of a perceived affront to conventional Sinhala musical sensibilities. Its course revealed much about how culture, authenticity and politics are intertwined in contemporary Sri Lanka. Commentators like Victor Ratnayake, Nanda Malini and Amaradeva's wife did not view the operatic rendition positively, though they recognised this type of singing as a highly developed form of musical expression in the Western tradition. They felt such a rendition was harmful to the 'essential' quality of the song (*Daily Mirror* 2016). But more intriguing was the response of those who viewed the operatic rendition positively and chose to defend it. After the incident, Jayasinghe gave a number of interviews. She went to extraordinary lengths to establish her Sinhala and Buddhist credentials while at the same time defending her right to musical innovation. She highlighted the fact that she came from a Sinhala Buddhist family, was a descendant of John de Silva and was educated at Vishaka College, a prestigious Buddhist girls' school in Colombo (Vithana 2016; Jayasinghe 2016). Similarly, those who defended her, like the fusion musician Harsha Makalande, also a descendant of John de Silva, highlighted that Jayasinghe's rendition did not damage the 'patriotism' of the original song (*Daily Mirror* 2016). The Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremasinghe, appearing on a state-affiliated television network, spoke at length about the *Danno Budunge* incident. He emphasised the historical cosmopolitanism of Sinhala culture and argued that such cultural openness was vital to the country's future. Like Makalande, he insisted that Jayasinghe's rendition had done no harm to the Sinhala or Buddhist identity of the song.

The *Danno Budunge* incident underscores how Sinhala and Buddhist identities remain significant sites of cultural and ideological production in contemporary Sri Lanka. The position of those who defended the right to cultural innovation, but nevertheless insisted that the essence of Sinhala identity was unaffected, spoke to the complex and contradictory terrain occupied by authenticity, or *apekama*, in Sinhala nationalist discourse. There are many routes, some seemingly contradictory, to authenticity. For some, like those who placed

Danno Budunge in the 'art song' tradition, the discourse of *apekama* has well-defined cultural boundaries. Others favour a more open position. For them the cultural coordinates of *apekama* are fuzzier and open to negotiation. However, both sides agree that something that can be termed or identified as 'authenticity' exists. This book attempts to historicise the discourse of authenticity in Sinhala nationalism, and in doing so raises a series of interrelated questions that apply not only to Sinhala nationalism and Sri Lanka but also to nationalism and authenticity more generally: Why is authenticity so central to nationalism? What kinds of conditions demand, sustain and reproduce it? Can we think of multiple and contending authenticities instead of one homogeneous discourse? What can a critical yet empathetic account of the life worlds of nationalists tell us about nationalism itself? What is the existential security they seek through authenticity and is this related to its remarkable staying power?

Theorising authenticity and nationalism

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2017) provides a range of definitions of 'authenticity', which include veracity, correctness, verisimilitude and the quality of being authoritative and real. As we shall see, in nationalist discourse all of these senses of authenticity overlap. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, however, also notes that authenticity has a philosophical resonance, particularly in existentialist philosophy. This second philosophical iteration of authenticity has received significant scholarly attention. For instance, moral philosophers hold authenticity to be a key ingredient of the autonomous modern self – expressed as an 'ethic of authenticity' (Ferrara 1993), where the modern individual is seen as one who is capable of making decisions free of external cultural and social pressures. Colloquially, this would approximate the notion of being true to one's self. However, this view of authenticity has been critiqued in philosophy as enabling a self-indulgent sense of identity – an identity that has no compulsion towards the collective 'good' and is therefore amoral and selfish. In recent philosophical debates authenticity has made a return, particularly in the writing of Charles Taylor (1991), where authenticity is seen as something that transcends the self. To be truly authentic in this understanding is to recognise the existence of others and to critically recognise the values of these others in constituting one's own subjectivity. Taylor's reflections arise from the particular context of Canadian multiculturalism. He engages with the critical multicultural concern with how

democratic societies should accommodate diversity. In this sense the philosophical approach to authenticity is also deeply political.

The philosophical engagement of authenticity, though not devoid of social and political concerns, is primarily an individual existential question. The notion of authenticity as it is used in this book has a very different genealogy. If Taylor sees authenticity as something that can give the individual a sense of uniqueness, but at the same time place the individual self in relation to moral obligations to others in society, authenticity in nationalist discourse, which forms my primary area of concern, is about existence as a national collective, where authenticity demarcates the boundaries of what is allowed in and what is left out. In its nationalist articulation, authenticity becomes a punitive discourse. It banishes and marginalises those who are 'inauthentic'. This notion of authenticity is closely tied to the formation of the modern nation state and its self-projection as a 'hoary' institution with an intricate body of rituals and practices that legitimise its existence (Gellner 1983). It is also a notion of authenticity that has the ability to command from its national community a kind of 'filial' duty and blind allegiance (Said 1983). The question of authenticity has been a key underlying concern in the theorisation of nationalism. In the literature on nationalism authenticity can be seen as a fault-line along which one of the major theoretical debates on nationalism in the twentieth century – the primordial versus modernist debate – has played out.

Nation and nationalism – primordial versus modernist explanations

Most theories of nationalism can be placed under the two major categories of primordial and modernist, though such a neat division can obscure significant areas of overlap between the two approaches and obscure significant internal differences within each approach. The primordial thesis holds that national identity has a discernible and demonstrable connection to pre-modern forms of identity. The significant question posed here is whether ethno-nationalist identities associated with the modern nation state, a phenomenon that first developed fully in the nineteenth century, are related to forms of identity that predate it. This is not simply an academic question; it has real political and material consequences in places such as Sri Lanka, where there are many sharp disagreements over national identity. The claims on behalf of both the majority Sinhala community and the minority Tamil community are

grounded on historical claims to territory and cultural lineage on the island. Such primordial claims are also a defining feature of many other nationalisms the world over. History is a battleground on which contemporary scores are settled.

The primordial position does not necessarily imply that modern forms of rationality, institutional structures and socio-economic changes are irrelevant to understanding the formation of nation states. But in the work of theorists like Anthony Smith (1986; 1991) there is greater emphasis on examining the importance of *ethnie* or pre-modern ethnic identity in shaping modern nationalism. For Smith a sense of collective community associated with the idea of ethnic identity is important in explaining the enduring quality of national identity. Smith seeks to explain the depth and persistence of nationalist thinking by linking it to a sense of community that is not easily explained by a more modernist or constructivist position. As I will discuss later, a primordial emphasis is also visible in many postcolonial theories of nationalism. The post-colonial version of primordialism arises from the politics of decolonisation and the search for authenticity.

In contrast to this approach stands the work of Elie Kedourie (1966), who foreshadowed the notion of 'invention of tradition' found in Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). Kedourie, influenced by his own experiences as an Iraqi Jew, and writing in the aftermath of German National Socialism and its destructive legacy, sees nationalism as a thoroughly modern phenomenon that is associated with statist institutional practices, though it appears with a romantic gloss. The romantic tradition of nationalist thought is often traced to the eighteenth-century German scholar Johann Herder and his view that there is an organic unity between people, their language and their ethnic identity, and that the legitimacy of the state derives from this organic unity. Many scholars critical of National Socialism saw Herder's views as precursors to the biological racism that inspired Nazism (Williams 1973). However, for Kedourie, nationalism, despite its modern origins, was also atavistic and tribal because of the secular religiosity and the divisiveness it could inspire. In the subsequent 'modernist' or 'constructivist' theorisations of nationalism the direct political concerns that informed Kedourie's work are less apparent. Similar concerns are, however, also visible in constructivist scholarship's treatment of nationalist claims to authenticity and tradition as fictions emerging from an atavistic mindset that has no place in a modern state, where citizenship should be the key index of belonging. This division between an atavistic and a rational or 'civic' nationalism is more apparent than real. As Wimmer and Schiller (2003) point out,

there is a deep-seated methodological nationalism that pervades the social sciences and humanities, where nationalism is a normative and invisible 'container model' through which the world is understood. The nation and nationalism have become naturalised ways of looking at the world and are taken as ready-made frameworks through which social, political, economic and cultural organisation in the world can be understood. Because of the invisibility of methodological nationalism, Western state-building is seen as normative, non-nationalist and liberal whereas non-Western state-building is seen as 'nationalist' in a negative sense, 'forgetting' that things like 'ethnic cleansing' and expulsion of minorities have very much been a part of European nation-building (Wimmer and Schiller 2003, 582).

This slide from the violence of nation-building to a language of modernist transformation is clearly visible in the work of Ernest Gellner (1983), who rejected Kedourie's premise that nationalism was fuelled by atavistic and irrational human passions. Gellner instead locates the emergence of nationalism within a set of structural shifts in the social transition from agrarian-based production to industrialism. Gellner suggests that mass education, literacy and the bureaucratic rationality that accompanies industrialisation are preconditions for the emergence of nationalism. The overt constructivism of this position is well encapsulated in Gellner's often quoted observation that 'it is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round' (Gellner 1983, 55).

Benedict Anderson's (1991 [1983]) popular and widely influential 'imagined communities' thesis also emerges from the modernist paradigm. Print capitalism, which is central to Anderson's argument, can arise only within a structural economic transformation from pre-capitalist to capitalist, which can be glossed as a transition from pre-modern to modern. He argues that the opportunity for a community to imagine itself as a nation depends on the availability of mass-printed genres of writing such as the newspaper and the novel. These genres allow different groups to begin imagining themselves as belonging to a larger national collective. Print culture is also crucial for the spread of notions of authenticity, creating the conditions for the mass dissemination and uptake of ideas and styles of thought. It is primarily through writing that notions of authenticity begin circulating in society at large.

Anderson also argues that with industrialisation in Europe the very conception of time changes from a religious to a secular frame, where time is defined by the calendar and the clock, or what Anderson calls 'empty homogeneous time'. According to Anderson this modern conception of

time is critical for a nation to imagine itself as a community of connected individuals occupying a simultaneous time frame facilitated by modern mass-market literary genres like the newspaper and the novel. A significant difference between Anderson and Gellner is that whereas Gellner emphasises the institutional nature of nationalism, Anderson sees it as both institutional and popular. Gellner's theorisation allows culture only a limited role in nationalism whereas Anderson sees it as central. Anderson's work, arguably, laid much of the groundwork for subsequent 'cultural' readings of nationalism and also opens out a conceptual space in which to critically explore the role of authenticity in the nationalist imagination.

The postcolonial critique of nationalism

Partha Chatterjee (1986; 1993) was one of the pioneers in providing a specifically postcolonial theorisation of nationalism. Chatterjee's work is based largely on Bengal, but he extrapolates the Bengali experience to India, the South Asian region and the entire Asian and African ex-colonial world. He objects to what he sees as the primacy granted to Europe as the originary site of nationalist thinking in the work of scholars like Gellner and Anderson. Instead he proposes a model where Indian nationalist discourse is seen as an innovative adaptation of a European discourse, which forged a revolutionary nationalist movement even when the structural socio-economic conditions for nationalism were unavailable. Chatterjee argues that Indian anti-colonial nationalism achieved success in the cultural sphere even though it did not possess the material or institutional resources to successfully challenge colonialism in the material or public realm. It was in culture, Chatterjee argues, that Indian nationalism imagined a radically different alternative to the technocratic modernity presupposed by European nationalism. In essence Chatterjee's argument makes the notion of authenticity central to decolonising nationalism. It is by imagining an authentic cultural domain, which is not 'contaminated' by colonialism, that nationalism mobilises itself. As we shall see, this is a deep-seated conceptual orientation from which not only nationalists, but critical scholarship like Chatterjee's, cannot fully escape.

Chatterjee builds his argument by proposing a dual model of Indian nationalism. He argues that in its public institutionalised form Indian nationalism is derivative of European nationalism, but that in the private sphere it sees itself as fundamentally different. Chatterjee (1986) calls this the 'thematic' and 'problematic' of anti-colonial nationalism.

At the thematic level Chatterjee argues that anti-colonial nationalism reproduced the Manichaeic division of the world into East and West – as in the *Danno Budunge* controversy, which was fuelled by the notion that the ‘Western’ operatic tradition was alien to ‘Eastern’ Sinhala culture. However, at the level of the problematic, Chatterjee argues that anti-colonial nationalism contested the colonial view that colonised people were incapable of self-governance and lacked agency. The cultural exceptionality claimed for the East was the ground on which a structure of feeling was constructed that the East was morally and spiritually superior to the West, and this sense of cultural superiority in turn legitimised independent nationhood for the colonised. Chatterjee, however, recognises that this poses a dilemma for post-independence India because it leaves a poisonous essentialist legacy that drives far-right movements like *hindutva* in India. Chatterjee sets up the problem of nationalist thought on an East–West binary, but it is important to bear in mind that the West was not the only source against which nationalism defined itself. As already mentioned, the *hela* movement in Sri Lanka in the 1930s imagined the Sinhala nation in opposition to India.

Chatterjee’s work does not escape the dilemma of nationalist authenticity it identifies – that of seeing the world in Manichaeic East–West terms. This difficulty may be illustrated by examining his notion of the inner and outer domains of nationalism. The outer or the public domain is where anti-colonial nationalism follows the template set by colonial modernity, but the inner private domain is where it claims to be authentic and free from colonial corruption. It is not clear in Chatterjee’s work whether he sees this idea of an inner domain as a strategic essentialist move made by Indian nationalism or whether he believes in the existence of such a domain (Batabyal 2005, 37–42). There is an insistent move in Chatterjee’s work to prove, as it were, the existence of a sphere of Indian cultural life that was unaffected by contact with the West. At times Chatterjee seems to be only suggesting that this was in effect how nationalist thinkers like Gandhi and Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay conceptualised the nation – thereby maintaining a critical distance between Gandhian thought and his own critical genealogy of Indian nationalist thought. However, at the same time Chatterjee’s own theoretical model seems to be based on a notion of an authentic inner life that evaded the colonial gaze (Chatterjee 1986, 54–125).

This problem in Chatterjee can be related productively to the issue of methodological nationalism – in how it responds to the notion that ‘European nationalism’ is the norm. It also relates to the discussion that follows on how an East–West imaginary casts a long shadow over

postcolonial studies. Chatterjee's model of Indian nationalism is built on a refutation of the work of scholars like Anderson and Gellner, whom he sees as upholding the perception that European nationalism is the normative liberal model of nationalism and that non-Western nationalisms are deviant aberrations (Chatterjee 1986, 4–6). Chatterjee theorises that the so-called 'aberration' in non-Western nationalism is an inherent structural feature – that the turn to culture is not atavism but is prompted by the conditions of colonialism. In making this move, Chatterjee implicitly buys into normative methodological nationalism – the unacknowledged fact that European or Western nation states are also built on an 'atavistic' nationalist past, which involved violence and turmoil (Wimmer and Schiller 2003, 581–2).

The dilemma arising from how the West is seen as a normative model and the resultant urge to contest this view by building an argument for Eastern exceptionality is not unique to Chatterjee. A more explicit expression of an East–West binary is visible in the work of scholars such as Talal Asad and Ashis Nandy, where authenticity expresses itself as a critique of secularism. This has significant implications for critical engagements with nationalism because many majoritarian nationalist projects position themselves in opposition to 'secular Western' traditions. We shall see later that this procedural similarity between postcolonial theorisations of nationalism and exclusivist cultural-nationalist thinking is also replicated in some scholarship on Sri Lanka.

Talal Asad, one of the foremost critics of secularism, argues that the secularisation thesis does not sufficiently recognise how the secular and the religious co-determine each other. In Asad's view, informed significantly by Islam's claim to political legitimacy, religion can rarely be confined to the space accorded to it by the nation state. Asad argues that, given the coercive reach of the nation state, no discourse that has ambitions beyond 'mere belief or inconsequential talk in public can remain indifferent to state power in a secular world' (Asad 1999, 191). The arguments here also stem from a view that certain religious formations, like strands of Protestant Christianity, are perceived as 'rational' and 'normative', and are given a public role, whereas Islam is not: 'Only religions that have accepted the assumptions of liberal moral and political discourse are being commended' (Asad 1999, 180).

Asad's position is shaped by a binary worldview of a secularised West and a religious non-West. As Vincent Pecora points out, Asad in his earlier work *Genealogies of Religion* posits an idea of 'discrepant experience' by contrasting static Islamic societies with their secular and changing Western counterparts (Pecora 2006, 25–42). Pecora argues that Asad's

position is very close to the absolute East–West difference that haunts the work of scholars like Samuel Huntington (Pecora 2006, 43). Sindre Bangstad (2009) has also explored the implications of the East–West binary in Asad’s work and argues that it generates a static, historically transcendental view of Islam which stands as an authentic embodiment of alterity against an equally monolithic West. The difference between East and West in this perspective often appears unbridgeable. Broad similarities are also visible between Asad’s work and the work of Ashis Nandy in India. Nandy (1990), who has long held the view that secularism is an inhuman Western imposition on Indian society, has proposed a traditional notion of religious faith, which he sees as inherently tolerant, as an alternative. But, as both Aamir Mufti (2000) and Pecora (2006) argue, even if one were to accept Nandy’s romantic view of pre-modern faith, his solution fails to consider how religio-cultural identity in modernity is institutionalised and organised within the nation state.

The cultural-nationalist and postcolonial critiques of secularism run in parallel here. For many cultural nationalists, secular ideals are flawed because of their Western origins. The cultural-nationalist call for a return to an indigenous and authentic way of life is often informed by a majoritarian nationalist script, unlike the postcolonial position, which desires some form of multicultural coexistence. But both positions are shaped by the thematic of nationalist thought. They hold a Manichaean worldview that posits an essential difference between East and West.

Theorising nationalism in Sri Lanka

The primordial versus modernist debate has also played out in scholarly debates about nationalism and ethnic identity in Sri Lanka. Generally, in scholarship predating the 1980s, modern identity categories such as Sinhala, Tamil or Muslim were taken as givens – often implicitly seen as extending from the precolonial to the postcolonial period, though careful historical and sociological scholarship always drew distinctions between modern Sri Lankan society and precolonial forms of society and community. The 1980s, however, marked a period when questions of nation, nationalism, ethnic identity and how these related to the history of the island became overt political concerns in scholarship. In a very broad sense scholarship became ‘politicised’, and when scholars working in a range of humanities and social sciences disciplines wrote about Sri Lanka they were keenly conscious of how their work was in conversation with nationalist politics, whether they desired such ‘conversation’ or not.

This sensitivity to the political context in which academic production took place became an especially marked feature of Sri Lankan scholarship following the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom. It also meant that liberal and leftist scholarship felt an ethical compulsion to engage with and critique the excesses of nationalism. For instance, Newton Gunasinghe, a prominent leftist scholar, wrote a short essay entitled 'May Day after the July Holocaust'. He observed that the 'Left and democratic forces are in a situation of theoretical disarray' (Gunasinghe 1996 [1984], 197). What he meant was that the analytical categories deployed by leftists, especially class, did not explain the unprecedented ethno-nationalist violence of 1983, which left hundreds, perhaps thousands, dead and almost 100,000 Tamils living in temporary shelters across the country. Gunasinghe's provocative contention was that class as a unit of analysis would be superseded by ethnicity because a class-based analysis of Sri Lankan society could not account for the violence of 1983, where ethnicity 'overdetermined' other social categories. Gunasinghe argued that in future scholars committed to social justice in Sri Lanka would need to engage with the issue of ethnicity in order to understand and respond to the problems of the Sri Lankan polity.

Gunasinghe's theoretical conundrum was not unique. The events of 1983 prompted scholars from a range of ideological persuasions, not only leftists, to revisit their understandings of the Sri Lankan polity – a reassessment reflected in the report *Sri Lanka, the Ethnic Conflict: Myths, Realities and Perspectives* (Committee for Rational Development 1984), published a few months before Gunasinghe's essay. As the title indicates, this volume – which emerged from the efforts of a broad spectrum of scholars in the aftermath of 1983 – attempted to provide a 'rational' basis for understanding Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict. Some important insights into Sri Lankan society emerged through the collective efforts of these scholars in the decades following 1983. One general feature of this scholarship was revisiting the Sri Lankan past and attempting to present revisionist accounts of Sri Lankan history – particularly with a view to critiquing essentialist and hoary notions of ethno-nationalist identity that fed the ethno-nationalist conflict. In the 1980s much of this scholarship focused on Sinhala society and culture, because Sinhala nationalism was seen as a threat to the democratic future and the existential security of minority communities in the country. In the 1990s, as Tamil militancy against the largely Sinhala-dominated state assumed a more authoritarian nature and stifled dissent within the Tamil community, scholars began to look at Tamil society and culture with a similar degree of critical intensity.

A debate that took place between the revisionist historian R. A. L. H. Gunawardana and the Sinhala language and literature scholar K. N. O. Dharmadasa in the early 1990s underscored the political stakes of academic scholarship. Gunawardana published an essay entitled 'People of the Lion: The Sinhala Identity and Ideology in History and Historiography', in which he questioned commonly held notions about Sinhala identity and its 2,500-year antiquity (Gunawardana 1990 [1979]). Gunawardana argued, through detailed engagement with historical sources, that when the term 'Sinhala' first appeared, around the first century AD, it only referred to a number of ruling families; it gradually grew to describe the kingdom, higher-status families and finally, by the twelfth century, all Sinhala speakers (Rogers 1994, 12). Gunawardana was also careful to distinguish this use of 'Sinhala' from its modern use, which he ascribed to the influence of racial ideologies introduced by colonial governance and scholarship and their subsequent internalisation by Sinhala intellectuals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Gunawardana 1990 [1979], 72–9).

Though Gunawardana's essay was first published in 1979, Dharmadasa's rebuttal only appeared in 1989, almost ten years later. The timing of the rebuttal was significant. As Serena Tennekoon (1990) has argued, in the mid 1980s the historical provenance of Sinhala identity became a matter of public intellectual debate, and Sinhala intellectuals were keenly conscious of academic critiques of Sinhala identity. Following the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom, Sinhala nationalists attempted to rationalise the violence as a product of a historical enmity between the two groups. The post-1983 period also witnessed a sense of existential insecurity about Sinhala identity and culture as Tamil nationalist demands intensified and international sympathy for the Tamil cause gathered force (Tennekoon 1990, 205). These debates on Sinhala identity often spilled over into public spaces such as newspapers where amateur 'historians' jostled with those with academic authority. The debates, though ostensibly scholarly deliberations on Sinhala cultural identity, were in reality battlegrounds on which nationalist scores were to be settled. They also provided space for Sinhala nationalists to paint as 'unpatriotic' any voices critical of standard wisdom about Sinhala cultural and linguistic antiquity, such as intellectuals connected to NGOs funded by countries perceived as sympathetic to the Tamil cause.

Dharmadasa's rebuttal refuted the twelfth-century date proposed by Gunawardana. He argued that Sinhala identity can be traced back to at least the fifth century AD. He also refuted the idea that modern Sinhala identity emerged in the nineteenth century and argued that Sinhala

intellectuals of that time were simply articulating old ideologies in new ways (Rogers 1994, 12).

The original refutation was published in the *Sri Lanka Journal of the Humanities*, a scholarly journal published in Sri Lanka. The controversy became more public because Dharmadasa also wrote a series of articles to the Sinhala-language *Irida Divayina* (Sunday Island) newspaper. Given public sentiment about Sinhala identity and culture at the time, Dharmadasa was seen as a Sinhala intellectual defending the integrity of Sinhala culture. As one commentator expressed it, 'I believe that the whole nation should salute Prof. Dharmadasa for dispelling the misconceptions that arose about our national identity and nationalism' (quoted in Galahitiyawa 2001). The public nature of the controversy also prompted Gunawardana to write a short pamphlet entitled *Historiography in a Time of Conflict* (1995), in which he explored the politics of how the past is constructed in contemporary Sri Lanka, and criticised Sinhala intellectuals, including Dharmadasa, for complicity in providing scholarly legitimacy for nationalist myth-making (Gunawardana 1995, 22–7).

The question of whether ethno-nationalist identities are primordial or modern, therefore, has had direct political resonance in post-1983 Sri Lanka. The line between academic scholarship and political intervention has been difficult to sustain, though many scholars would like to see their work as primarily scholarly. Two important collections of essays published in 1990 and 1995 also reflected the trend for scholars to intervene in debates about nationalist authenticity. The first, *History and the Roots of Conflict* (1990), was framed explicitly as an academic intervention that sought to 'shed light on the sources of the political tragedy that has engulfed Sri Lanka in the past decade' (Spencer 1990, 3). The volume republished R. A. L. H. Gunawardana's essay 'People of the Lion' in order to make it more accessible to an international audience. This volume gathered a range of scholars from different disciplines such as history, anthropology and sociology. It probed different aspects of nationalist myth-making in both Sinhala and Tamil nationalism and at the same time attempted to document multicultural alternatives to polarising nationalist visions of history and community. Similar in intent, though methodologically much more postmodernist, was the volume *Unmaking the Nation* (1995). This collection was framed as a critical intervention that sought to portray the nation and nationalism as inherently oppressive and exclusionary. The editors observed that 'we are not enamoured by the possibilities of the nation and nationalism, rather we are deeply suspicious of its claims and consequences. Not simply because the nation has failed – a viable claim in the Sri Lankan context ... it [is]

untenable as an idea and as a form of social organization' (Jeganathan and Ismail 1995, 2).

Curiously, *Unmaking the Nation* makes no reference to *History and the Roots of Conflict*, which preceded it. But one of the contributors to the volume, David Scott, picks up the debate between Gunawardana and Dharmadasa to make a wide-ranging epistemological critique of liberal scholarship and its ability to intervene in nationalist debates (Scott 1995, 10–24). Scott restages the Gunawardana–Dharmadasa debate to argue that Dharmadasa's refutation of Gunawardana on the basis of historical sources undermines the liberal political critique of nationalism that Gunawardana intended. The question as Scott frames it is: If Gunawardana got his history wrong, as Dharmadasa claims, what does that do to the political project of undermining Sinhala nationalism and its claims to historical authenticity? Scott's solution, which he extends in a later book in which this essay is incorporated, is to abandon history altogether, or to 'dehistoricise history' and to move away from the very notion of identity politics to an undefined alternative vision of community (Scott 1999).

This 'radical' suggestion is made as part of a grander critique of secular modernity, which he argues has failed in Sri Lanka. History and democracy are seen as integral parts of this failed modernity. Instead Scott calls for 'ways and means of inventing, cultivating and institutionalising cultural-political spaces in which groups ... can formulate and articulate their moral-political concerns and their self-governing claims in the (natural and conceptual) languages of their respective historical traditions' (Scott 1999, 185). Scott's views have also influenced at least two other scholars – Ananda Abeysekara (2008), a religious studies scholar, and Qadri Ismail (2005), a literary studies scholar – who have extended and expanded Scott's ideas to question much of the revisionist Sri Lankan scholarship that went before. A particular target of both Abeysekara and Ismail has been history and anthropology as colonially tainted systems of knowledge that are condemned to produce objectifying and essentialist accounts of Sri Lankan society and culture. Procedurally, Scott's, Abeysekara's and Ismail's work also reproduces the East–West binary discussed in relation to Chatterjee: there is an underlying assumption in their work that 'Western' scholarship and epistemologies are unable to contend with non-Western realities.

One of the ironies of this critical trend in scholarship on Sri Lanka is its structural similarity to many positions taken by Sinhala cultural nationalists. A number of Sinhala cultural nationalists have argued that Western scholarship is unable to understand Sinhala society and that concepts such as democracy or secularism have little meaning for

Sinhala society and by extension for Sri Lanka (de Silva 2008). The political implications of such claims are deeply problematic because they foreclose any discussion of how the state can be reformulated to accommodate the linguistic, cultural and ethnic plurality of the island. This reformulation of the state has been a key demand of Tamil politicians since independence in 1948. While Scott, Abeysekara and Ismail are critical of such essentialist nationalist assumptions about Sri Lankan culture and society, at the conceptual level their own positions are similar to many cultural-nationalist approaches. Their sweeping critique of secular modernity and the cultural-nationalist assertion of 'indigenous' knowledge and epistemology have much in common.

One may perhaps agree with Scott that, as a political strategy, attempting to debate the veracity of different versions of history can be self-defeating. However, the conceptual move made from this critique to the wider critique of colonial modernity poses a number of questions. Scott's position, if taken at face value, spells the end of critical historical or sociological scholarship as it is conventionally understood. But, as Nira Wickramasinghe, a Sri Lankan historian, points out, in Scott's understanding colonial governmentality becomes a kind of faceless, omnipotent force that radically altered the social and institutional structures people inhabited (Wickramasinghe 2015). Wickramasinghe further argues that such a homogenising understanding of colonial power overstates the efficacy and influence of colonial policy – that it was never as systematic or influential as it looked on paper. At the same time, Wickramasinghe (2015) points out that Scott's approach says very little about how colonial modernity was experienced by people on the ground – how they negotiated it, experienced it and resisted it. Scott's approach may therefore replicate the homogenising tendency of early historical and sociological scholarship that stopped at the colonial archive and did little to tease out the perspectives of subaltern peoples and their lives, something Wickramasinghe attempts in her methodologically innovative *Metallic Modern* (2014), where the lives of ordinary Sri Lankans experiencing colonial modernity are visualised through their interactions with everyday machines.

I have taken significant space to engage with the ideas emerging from David Scott's work because of its implications for the question of the theorisation of authenticity. However, sociological and historical scholarship in Sri Lanka in general was not significantly influenced by this critique. Although some scholars like Wickramasinghe have engaged critically with Scott's ideas, most have simply ignored them. The last decade or so has seen a significant shift, unrelated to Scott's critique, in

Sri Lankan scholarship. Since the late 1990s, and particularly with the bloody conclusion of Sri Lanka's military conflict in 2009, scholarship in general has tried to move away from trying to contest or deconstruct nationalist ideologies. This does not mean that it is any less ethically or politically committed. Instead scholars have tried to break out of the nationalist frames to seek out new ways of positioning Sri Lankan studies within global and regional historical and sociological frameworks. Rather than thinking of Sri Lanka as an island nation (Sivasundaram 2013), new scholarship has sought to incorporate it into regional and global networks – a move that in its own way undermines nationalist assumptions about the past.

Authenticity inside and outside the nation

A number of recent studies have sought to re-read Sri Lankan history and society from perspectives that are not constrained by the nation. In some ways this is similar to the position taken by the historian Prasenjit Duara (1995), who argued for 'rescuing history from the nation'. Duara pointed out how the writing of history has been closely tied to the formation and career of the nation state. He argued that this has led to a kind of linear history writing, which reproduces a national or nationalist teleology. The post-1980s scholarship I charted above, in addition to responding to the nationalist political context of the time, was also trying to find new ways of writing about Sri Lanka's society, culture and past which broke with the nation-centred scholarship that preceded it. Most historians of Sri Lanka from the 1950s to the 1980s saw themselves as historians of a newly independent nation, as is reflected in the form and content of history from this period. This was not unique to Sri Lanka. It was a model of historical scholarship popular globally (Biedermann and Strathen 2017, 12–14). In the 1980s, with the Sri Lankan nation state in crisis, scholarship became more overtly anti-nationalist in a political sense, but not necessarily anti- or post-nationalist in a conceptual sense; scholarship remained methodologically nationalist (Wimmer and Schiller 2003).

Recent scholarship, in contrast, has consciously shifted its gaze away from the nation. Anne Blackburn's *Locations of Buddhism* (2010), Nira Wickramasinghe's *Metallic Modern* (2014) and Steven Kemper's *Rescued from the Nation* (2015) are three efforts in this line. Through a detailed and nuanced account of the life of Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala, a nineteenth-century scholar monk, Blackburn explores how Buddhism was not a singular discourse; it was defined in relation to new economic,

political and social changes wrought by modernity, contact with Christianity, collaboration and connection with other Asian Buddhist societies and negotiations between modern education and precolonial intellectual heritage. Although the primary focus of the study is on Buddhism, it also has many implications for how nineteenth-century Sri Lankan society and Sinhala society in particular are imagined. Blackburn's study opens up the nineteenth century as a space of multiple discourses coexisting, pushing and rubbing against each other. In doing so Blackburn in effect lifts Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala out of the Sinhala and Buddhist revivalist framework within which he was securely placed in earlier scholarship.

Steven Kemper's *Rescued from the Nation* (2015) attempts a similar re-reading of Anagarika Dharmapala, the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Buddhist missionary, who I treat extensively in this book. Kemper demonstrates Dharmapala's many entanglements locally, regionally and internationally and points to the ways in which Dharmapala's life goes beyond the national and nationalist frames imposed upon it. Nira Wickramasinghe's *Metallic Modern* (2014) is similar in spirit. It looks at how colonial subjects inhabited a world that was not entirely delimited by colonialism. She demonstrates this through the methodologically innovative move of looking at people as consumers of modernity through their interactions with everyday machines. The life-worlds Wickramasinghe recreates suggest that empire and nation were often remote from the everyday lives of people who often may have been more concerned with positioning themselves as part of a transnational technological modernity.

This broadening out of Sri Lankan studies also has important implications for authenticity. So far, the narrative of authenticity I have been tracing is one constituted for and within the nation. When you step outside the nation, it becomes obvious that people can have other sources of authenticity. For instance, in the *Danno Budunge* controversy, while the soprano Kishani Jayasinghe attempted to claim Sinhala and Buddhist credentials for herself, she was equally keen to establish her credentials as an internationally renowned singer in the operatic genre of singing. For those who defended her, Kishani's transnational musical lineage was an important source of legitimacy. Qualitatively, we can argue that the two types of authenticity are different – one socially embedded, institutionally sanctioned and nationalist, and the other more personal and affective. As we shall see over the course of this book, authenticity is a mobile concept and hard to pin down. Nationalist discourses, and at times liberal scholarship deconstructing nationalism, attempt to fix

authenticity and give it definite shape and form, but authenticity in practice can rarely be accommodated within such neat frames.

Structure and organisation of the book

This book is largely about a notion of Sinhala cultural and political authenticity that began to develop under colonialism and then became hegemonic in post-independence Sri Lanka. My intervention is ‘political’ in the sense that it engages critically with the self-understanding and self-projection of Sinhala nationalism as a discourse that has ancient origins. It is framed by the nation because it looks at the writing and imaginaries of three nationalist figures, or ‘father figures’, of the nation, and places them in a teleological line from the late nineteenth century to the present. If this study may be seen as a return to the nation, it is a return that is made in awareness of the political and conceptual critiques that have preceded it. Although the structure of the book reproduces a teleology inherent in Sinhala nationalism, the intent is to interrupt this teleology and cut against its logic, and to read the authenticity of nationalism as a dispersed rather than unified narrative. As scholars have observed, resisting methodological nationalism is remarkably difficult: the nation as a conceptual frame has seeped deep into the conceptual vocabulary of the social sciences and humanities (Wimmer and Schiller 2003; Brubaker 1996). One thing I consciously attempt in this book is to separate nationalism as a category of action from nationalism as a category of analysis. I do not ask, ‘What is a nation?’ Instead I ask questions about how nationalist thinkers inhabit the nation and how they reproduce it (Brubaker 1996, 13–22). One dimension of the book inevitably engages with a questioning and deconstruction of nationalist authenticity, but equally the book is interested in probing the why and how of authenticity. What are nationalists’ sources of authenticity? Why do they turn to authenticity? How does authenticity shift over their lives and careers, and how and why are nationalist figures reconstituted as icons of authenticity in post-independence Sinhala nationalism?

The three main protagonists of this book are Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike (1899–1959) and Gunadasa Amarasekara (born 1929). Their lives and careers cover a period during which Sri Lanka experienced colonialism, became politically independent of the British Empire and witnessed the emergence and rapid escalation of ethno-nationalist violence, which concluded in 2009 with a bloody end to armed secessionism. Though the war is over, Sri Lanka is

by no means a post-conflict society. Key political questions remain about the nature of the Sri Lankan nation state and its (in)ability to accommodate cultural, linguistic and political diversity. Neither Sinhala nor Tamil nationalism was laid to rest in 2009. Sinhala nationalism in particular is ascendant and remains steadfast in its belief that Sri Lanka is primarily a Sinhala and Buddhist nation. Cultural authenticity and its political effects continue to inform this Sinhala-centric view of the island. Authenticity may not mean what it did at the time of independence and during the subsequent emergence of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism as a decisive force. Authenticity's locations are different today, but it remains an influential feature of the cultural and political imaginary of Sinhala society.

I begin with some historical scene setting, which provides a contextual frame in which to locate the three father figures of Sinhala nationalism. In this chapter I explore the historical discourses that have informed identity-making in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Sri Lanka, and I delineate the processes that have informed and shaped Sinhala and Buddhist identity as it is understood today. The chapter looks at the impact of historiography, the colonial census, archaeology and Buddhism as factors that played a role in the formation of modern Sinhala nationalist discourse. In doing this I am keen not to read Sri Lanka's nineteenth century as the story of 'colonial modernity'. The chapter instead shows how colonial influences were selectively adopted and adapted by Sri Lankans, who also drew upon other local and regional influences in fashioning their selves.

The first of the chapters on the nationalist father figures looks at Anagarika Dharmapala, a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century religious reformer and polemicist who is often invoked in popular discourse as well as academic scholarship as a key figure in the origins of Sinhala nationalism. It begins with a brief account of Dharmapala's life and career and then turns to his vision of the Sinhala past, how he saw Buddhism and how he viewed non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist communities of the time. I argue that academic scholarship and popular discourse reproduce Dharmapala's legacy for different ends. In scholarship he is often taken as the representative of a particularly chauvinist Sinhala ideology and in the popular imagination he is an icon of nationalist authenticity. However, in much of his writing, Dharmapala's concerns lie elsewhere. He spent a significant portion of his life outside Sri Lanka and travelled extensively. Most of this travel was associated with Buddhist missionary work and points to a strong transnational dimension to his career. This transnational aspect also raises questions

about his identification and location as a nationalist figure. Authenticity for Dharmapala is both national and transnational. The gap between how Dharmapala is appropriated and understood today and how he saw himself demonstrates the shifting nature of authenticity, and the extent to which it is a product of the here and now.

The following chapter looks at S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, who became Sri Lanka's fourth prime minister in 1956. He was a controversial figure who played a key role in institutionalising Sinhala nationalism. In Sinhala nationalist narratives Bandaranaike is a key father figure, but also something of a paradox because of his elite and anglicised upbringing. Exploring three locations from early in his career – memoirs of his time in Oxford, his turn to a Gandhian idea of village revival and his conversion to Buddhism – I argue that Bandaranaike's ideas were part of an elite political discourse that was a world apart from the Sinhala society it sought to represent. This social gap caused Bandaranaike and other members of the elite to seek out various ways to legitimate their leadership. Although the irony of the 'inauthenticity' of Bandaranaike's attempts to indigenise his private and political self challenges the popular view of Bandaranaike as a progressive decolonising leader, it also foreshadows and anticipates the irony of Bandaranaike's appropriation and reconstruction as an 'authentic' figure of Sinhala nationalism in many strains of later Sinhala nationalist thinking, including that represented by Gunadasa Amarasekara, whose work is explored in the following chapter.

The primary focus of the chapter on Amarasekara is the culture of mourning that came to characterise postcolonial cultural nationalism. It shows Amarasekara's transformation from cosmopolitan nationalist to nativist. His thinking has wielded significant influence on the Sinhala youth of several post-independence generations, including mine. His novels and short stories have been enormously popular among the Sinhala reading public, and the *Jathika Chintanaya* (National Thought) movement he initiated in the 1980s has exercised an important influence on Sinhala nationalist ideology. Engaging with Amarasekara's thinking, and working through its complexities, throws into relief how the notion of authenticity circulates in the popular imagination and how it remains a key concern 70 years after independence. Amarasekara's early writing demonstrates a leftist orientation and is concerned with social justice. He shows a keen desire for a modern Sri Lankan consciousness built on Buddhist principles but also drawing on Marxist thinking.

Amarasekara's later writing, however, rejects cosmopolitanism and turns increasingly nativist. The function of authenticity in his thinking moves from being a source of strategic contact between

a sense of self and the world, to one that sees authenticity as a protective barrier that isolates the self from the modern world. This nativist turn is read against a series of historical transformations in Sri Lankan society, including the rise of militant Tamil nationalism, international criticism of Sinhala nationalism, the international isolation of Sri Lanka following the 1983 ethnic violence against Tamils, and the neo-liberal transformation of the Sri Lankan economy since the early 1980s. This chapter pushes the argument about authenticity in two directions. It shows how cultural nationalism in the postcolonial period can create a culture of mourning – a sense that authenticity is something lost and that the present is inauthentic. This results in a constantly past-oriented consciousness, which also looks to recreate this lost past in the present. The chapter also shows how a particularly impoverished version of history circulates within this type of nationalist discourse.

In concluding, I briefly explore authenticity in contemporary public discourse in Sri Lanka. Many of the reference points through which authenticity was articulated by Dharmapala, Bandaranaike and Amarasekara have become ‘tired’ signifiers. They no longer have the same hold over the public imagination. For instance, Sri Lanka’s long twentieth-century experiment whereby rural development was equated with paddy cultivation based on visions of Sinhala civilisation in antiquity, which inspired figures like Bandaranaike, has become something of an embarrassment in contemporary development and political discourse, despite its continued presence in popular culture. Accompanying this change has been the increasing commodification of traditional cultural signifiers such as the village and paddy cultivation, leading to them being seen as kitschy and ironic. This does not mean that the idea of authenticity is absent. It expresses itself in different forms and in different locations. The concluding chapter briefly traces some of these changing dynamics of authenticity against a narrative of socio-political change. Reflecting on the postcolonial afterlife of authenticity, the conclusion also pushes the discussion back in the direction of theorising and conceptualising authenticity. It raises as a provocation the question of the political and epistemological stakes of authenticity. It is easy to deconstruct authenticity, but its cultural and political affects cannot be wished away. Teasing out its historical genealogies therefore remains a necessary and important scholarly activity, given that nationalism appears to be gathering force in the twenty-first century, despite numerous premature pronouncements about our entry into a post-national age.

2

The protean life of authenticity: history, nation, Buddhism and identity

Introduction

The Sinhala race has a clearly documented unbroken history of over 2500 years. Ancient rock inscriptions, inscriptions in gold, huge viharas and dagobas [Buddhist pagodas] ... all bear unshakable witness to the heritage of the Sinhala nation.

(English translation of an extract from a 1980s Sinhala-language pamphlet entitled *Kauda Kotiya?* [Who Is the Tiger?], cited in Jayawardena [2003, 2])

[T]he Tamil-speaking people in Ceylon constitute a nation distinct from that of the Singalese [sic] in every fundamental test of nationhood, firstly that of a separate historical past at least as ancient and glorious as that of the Singalese, secondly by the fact of their being a linguistic entity entirely different from that of the Singalese, with an unsurpassed classical heritage.

(Statement made at the first national convention of the Tamil nationalist Federal Party in 1951, cited in Kearney [1985, 904])

These two statements are typical of nationalist understandings of Sri Lanka's past. Though they are separated by more than three decades, they underscore a particular orientation to the past – a belief that history can settle today's political scores. Both statements also project the notion of nationhood on to pre-modern times. Such ideas are not confined to populist nationalist sentiment, but have long permeated academic, policy

and political discourse. The formation of this historical imaginary, the role authenticity plays in it, and the many social, political and cultural strands that shape it are the main focus of this chapter. I adopt an orientation to nationalism that sees it as a ‘category of practice’ rather than a ‘category of analysis’ (Brubaker 1996). Therefore, rather than looking at nationalism as something that exists as an entity ‘out there’, which can be studied, I focus on significant discourses that have shaped notions of authenticity and nationalist imaginations.

The numerous controversies that have dogged the recent attempt to develop a new constitution for Sri Lanka – a process that began in 2016 – provide an example of how perceptions of the past influence the political present. A Public Representations Committee on Constitutional Reform was appointed in 2016 and carried out a nationwide consultation process. The entire parliament was then declared a Constituent Assembly and parliamentary sub-committees were appointed to deliberate different thematic areas of the constitution. This process, which has been mired in controversy, reached its last stages towards the end of 2017. At the time of writing, draft constitutional proposals were close to completion. A flash-point in this exercise has been the ‘unitary’ status of the country. Sinhala nationalist forces are rallying around this issue, prophesying the dissolution of Sinhala identity if any form of ‘federalist’ reform is implemented. In turn, politicians from the ruling alliance have declared that no change to the ‘unitary’ status of the country will be permitted.

There is a sense of *déjà vu* to this debate. Sri Lanka has been here many times before. Federalism was first proposed in post-independence Sri Lanka in 1957, as a means of accommodating the political aspirations of an influential segment of the Ceylon Tamil political leadership, but was staunchly opposed by Sinhala nationalists (de Silva 2005, 629). The Sinhala nationalist opposition arose from a historical vision that the entire territory of Sri Lanka was indivisible, but the Tamil demand was also problematic because it claimed to speak for the entire Tamil population in the island, subsuming significant internal differences such as the Indian Tamil community, composed mostly of plantation workers, whose interests the Ceylon Tamil political leadership did not represent. Federalism, however, remained a heated political topic throughout the twentieth century. When a model for devolving power based on provincial councils was half-heartedly implemented in 1987, under controversial circumstances involving Indian intervention, there was again a public outcry and stiff resistance from Sinhala nationalist groups. In the 1990s efforts to institute a new constitution with greater decentralisation of power failed. These contemporary political deliberations have been

heavily informed by history (Welikala 2015). In the Sinhala community, there is belief that Sri Lanka was a unified nation from time immemorial and that the Sinhala ethnic identity and the Buddhist religion were the mainstays of this historical ‘nation’.

Sri Lanka – colonial and postcolonial identity-making

The story of authenticity I chart in this book is primarily a nineteenth- and twentieth-century phenomenon. However, it is important to keep in mind that Sri Lanka was previously nestled within a larger South Asian and Southeast Asian world. Sri Lanka, meaning ‘resplendent land’ in Sanskrit, was renamed with the 1972 Republican Constitution. Before that, under British rule (1796–1948), it was known as Ceylon. In precolonial times, the island, sometimes referred to as ‘Lanka’ to distinguish it from its colonial and postcolonial history, was divided among various kingdoms, many of which had complex relationships with South and Southeast Asian polities. At times some local kings wielded significant power, with the ability to even raid overseas territories, but at the same time Sri Lankan kingdoms were subject to the influence of various South Asian powers – a system described as a galactic polity with a powerful central kingdom commanding the allegiance of weaker satellite kingdoms (Tambiah 1973). The island being situated in the Indian Ocean, its identity was also shaped by multiple waves of migration from South India and beyond. Moreover, the island was part of what has been called the Sanskrit ‘cosmopolis’ and the Buddhist world, which encompassed most of what is modern South and Southeast Asia (Bierdermann and Strathern 2017, 5).

In nationalist histories, precolonial kings and kingdoms are seen as either Sinhala or Tamil. Though both these terms may usefully be extended to describe certain aspects of the precolonial Sri Lankan polity, the identities and imaginaries they denoted in antiquity significantly differed from what exists today. As discussed in the introductory chapter, an emerging body of historical and sociological scholarship is now locating Sri Lanka and Sri Lankan identities within this larger Indian Ocean world, or what Nira Wickramasinghe (2014) has called, in the nineteenth-century context, ‘multiple loops of belonging’. I do not wish to draw a sharp line between the nineteenth century and what went before, because such a demarcation may overstate the impact of colonial ‘governmentality’ and its transformative impact on Sri Lankan society (Wickramasinghe 2015; 2017). However, one can argue that the

nineteenth century does mark a period when the Sri Lankan imagination became gradually 'islanded' (Sivasundaram 2013) – generating a sense of exceptionality as an island nation with a distinct history that set it apart from the rest of South Asia, which evolved into a distinct nationalist imaginary by the mid twentieth century.

The late nineteenth century also marks a period when Sri Lankans began to imagine themselves as part of a modern world in which science and technology increasingly penetrated everyday life. This was not a world simply delimited by British colonialism, but one in which colonialism itself facilitated other imaginative possibilities and solidarities. These changes in the quality and texture of life along with the emergence of new global superpowers such as the United States and regional giants such as Japan allowed people to imagine diverse ways of being in the world (Wickramasinghe 2014). The nationalist father figures who feature in the story of authenticity I fashion in this book moved in this complex and contradictory historical terrain.

Identity formation: Portuguese and Dutch genealogies

Registers of authenticity that gain social and political visibility in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have their beginnings in earlier times. By tracing these discourses it is possible to see how modern Sinhala identity was shaped by multiple influences and at the same time to avoid looking at the period of British colonisation from the early nineteenth century onwards as a period that 'invented' identities. Two areas in which Portuguese rule had an impact on Sinhala identity and authenticity were in the sociological division between Kandyan Sinhalese and Low Country Sinhalese, and the introduction of Christianity. For the Portuguese, Sri Lanka was at first important mainly as a trading post through which to control the lucrative Indian Ocean spice trade, especially in cinnamon, which grew on the island. These mercantile interests soon became political as the Portuguese sought territorial control and preferential trade agreements to cement their economic foothold. By 1597 the Portuguese had gained control over the southern lowlands, and in 1619 they annexed the north of the island as well (Wickramasinghe 2006, 10). But successive military and political campaigns to penetrate the interior failed, and Kandy remained independent (de Silva 1987, 19–123). A consequence of this was that the maritime regions of the country were exposed to Western influence for a much longer period, accentuating socio-cultural differences between those living in the coastal regions and

in the interior. In British colonial discourse this manifests as two sociological categories – Kandyan Sinhalese and Low Country Sinhalese – categories that were later appropriated by Sinhala elites (Rogers 1994, 19; Wickramasinghe 1995, 10).

From the late nineteenth century onwards Kandyan Sinhala identity and culture are seen as more authentic because of their perceived isolation from European contact. In the early twentieth century the *osariya* style of sari associated with the Kandyan Kingdom – a sartorial influence ironically deriving from South Indian influences – became the preferred style of dress for Sinhala middle-class women (Wickramasinghe 2006, 93). Anagarika Dharmapala was a staunch advocate of the *osariya* for Sinhala women. Kandyan exceptionalism was also visible in 1927 when the Donoughmore Commission began deliberating changes to Sri Lanka's constitution. Kandyan elites, fearing the dominance of Low Country Sinhalese, submitted a proposal for a federal system with a large Kandyan province in the centre of the island. Some influential British colonial administrators supported this effort because of their paternalistic attitude towards the Kandyan elite as bearers of authentic Sinhala tradition (Singh and Kukreja 2014, 193).

Early twentieth-century Sri Lankan Orientalist scholars like Ananda Coomaraswamy saw Kandyan culture as pristine and believed that Kandyan art and village life represented authentic Sinhaleanness (Brow 1999). These associations between Kandyan Sinhala identity and authenticity have continued into the post-independence period. Kandyan dance is the preferred dance form at state events and is often chosen to represent 'Sri Lankan/ Sinhala' dance internationally. Many urban Sinhala couples getting married in upmarket hotels in Colombo and other urban areas of the country adopt 'Kandyan customs' and 'Kandyan dress'. Similarly, Kandyan 'objects' are often imbued with an aura of authenticity. For instance, the return of the cranium of a Kandyan aristocrat who was executed by the British marked a process by which it was incorporated into the symbolic order of the postcolonial nation state (Wickramasinghe 1997). In the years before independence the British supported the development of 'national' identity and actively cooperated in the repatriation of objects such as the cranium. A similar process was also visible in the recovery and 'authentication' of what was believed to be the throne of the last king of Kandy (Wickramasinghe 2006, 107–9).

The introduction of Christianity in the form of Catholicism to the local mix of religions, which already included Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, was another significant social impact of Portuguese rule. Religion was deployed by the Portuguese as a political tool to further economic

and political goals. The Portuguese were successful in establishing churches and in spreading Catholicism in coastal parts of the country extending north from Colombo. A century of Portuguese proselytisation resulted in Christian populations in both the Tamil and Sinhala communities (de Silva 1987, 127–8). Catholicism remains the dominant form of Christianity in the country. With the rise of Buddhist revivalist sentiments in the mid nineteenth century and the politicisation of Buddhism in the twentieth century, the position of Sinhala Christians in the imagined community of the Sinhala nation has become ambiguous. At times they are included within the Sinhala nationalist imagination, but at other times they are seen as a ‘fallen’ group who are ‘less’ Sinhala for not being Buddhist (Bartholomuesz 1999, 140–55). In post-independence Sri Lanka this has led Sinhala Anglican and Catholic communities to increasingly claim authenticity by ‘indigenising’ their liturgical practices. Moreover, Sinhala Catholics in the western coastal belt have actively taken part in anti-Tamil violence, perhaps to ‘prove’ their Sinhalaness by visiting violence upon a minority Other (Stirrat 2006).

Dutch rule: rudimentary social classification and administration

The Dutch succeeded the Portuguese. They were also unsuccessful in conquering the Kandyan Kingdom, but in 1766 they compelled the Kandyan king to sign a treaty that gave them sovereignty over the entire coastline of the island (Wickramasinghe 2006, 12). The Dutch period saw the beginnings of a discourse of enumeration, which drew upon the knowledge generated by earlier Portuguese record-keeping. This Dutch work in turn had an impact on that carried out by the British in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The attribution of legal and political rights to communities contributed to the institutionalisation of these identities later. I will discuss the political impact of enumeration in greater detail in the next section when considering British rule and ‘colonial modernity’.

The Dutch practice of *tombo* registration (Wickramasinghe 2006, 25) anticipated the much more organised British enumeration in the nineteenth century; the baselines established by the Dutch were both inherited and modified by the British. Although the Dutch imposed some of their perceptions of racial identity on the local population, they did not follow a systematic social categorisation scheme. Dutch perceptions of the world were what Rogers (2004, 630) describes as those of ‘early

modern Europe' and their approach to colonialism was to a large extent not driven by the modernising and reformist zeal evident in the British period. But Dutch attempts at intervening in the island's politics do reveal racial perceptions that were inherited and normalised during the British period. For instance, Dutch attempts in the eighteenth century to unseat a South Indian Nayakkar Buddhist king who ruled the Kandyan Kingdom failed because they misunderstood the complexities of Sinhala identity and Buddhist kingship (Rogers 2004).

The British debt to this body of Dutch knowledge is reflected in British Governor Hugh Cleghorn's 1799 minute on the island (Rogers 2004, 633). The Cleghorn minute is an early British impression of the island's inhabitants before systematic enumeration and classification had been carried out. Cleghorn wrote that 'Two different nations [Sinhala and Tamil], from a very ancient period, have divided between them the possession of the island' (cited in Rogers 2004, 633). The Cleghorn minute is also a striking instance of the extent to which identity politics in the post-independence period selectively adapts colonial legacies. The 1951 Federal Party document cited at the beginning of this chapter draws its historical authority directly from the Cleghorn minute and cites it as independent evidence of the antiquity of the Tamil nation on the island. This two-nation theory was not sustained for long, as British knowledge of the island and its inhabitants grew and a more complex set of categories replaced it.

British rule and 'colonial modernity'

In 1802, under the Treaty of Amiens, the Dutch ceded their territories to the British and Sri Lanka became a British crown colony. It was not until 1815, and the defeat of the Kandyan Kingdom and the signing of the Kandyan Convention, that British colonial control extended over the entire island (Wickramasinghe 2006, 27). The early years of British rule were more or less an extension of the kind of mercantile-focused administration the Dutch had maintained. It was only later that the British moved towards systematic administration of the entire island. The watershed year in the emergence of this form of governance is 1833, with the implementation of some of the recommendations of the Royal Commission led by W. M. C. Colebrooke and C. H. Cameron, which proposed wide-ranging economic and legal reforms inspired by the reformist political ideology articulated by utilitarian philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (Wickramasinghe 2006, 28).

The commission's modernising zeal was evident in its rationalisation of the administrative system. Up to this point the state collected revenue or required services on the basis of an individual's status. There were also many regional administrative differences, mostly notably those between the former Kandyan Kingdom and the maritime provinces. The commission argued that these distinctions inhibited both economic growth and social progress. Instead, it proposed a uniform administration based on an arbitrary territorial division of the entire island into five provinces. By reorganising the administrative structure the commission's intent was to create the single space of a modern state and to erase past differences that reflected the island's old political divisions (Wickramasinghe 2006, 28–32).

Most histories of Sri Lanka mark the Colebrooke–Cameron reforms as a moment of radical change from feudalism to bureaucratic rationality, or from tradition to modernity – ‘the reformist zeal generated by the Colebrooke–Cameron reforms and a passion for change affected every sphere of activity – political, economic and social’ (de Silva 1981, 265). Another historian, G. C. Mendis, notes that the reforms ‘recommended by Colebrooke and Cameron contributed greatly to the advancement of Ceylon. They have turned the course of history of Ceylon in a modern direction’ (Mendis 1944, cited in Scott 1999, 42). It is important to remember that many of these changes may have had limited resonance in the wider population whose lives were impacted upon by colonial modernity in widely varying ways (Wickramasinghe 2015). At the same time, the modernising efforts of the British did have a significant impact on a limited stratum of Sri Lankan society, particularly those educated in English.

In addition to making English the language of administration, English-medium education was a central component of the Colebrooke–Cameron reforms. The educational reforms recommended by Colebrooke and Cameron and the position they ascribe to the English language as a medium of modernity and progress anticipate by a few years the much better-documented and well-known Macaulay minute in India in 1835 (Coperahewa 2009). In both cases English was seen as the language of modernity, while local languages were relegated to the status of historical artifacts, worthy of preservation and study, but of little utility value. Although English was associated with modernity and progress, the education model promoted was not a democratic one envisioning English education for society at large. English-medium instruction was limited to a few schools through which a class of English-educated Sri Lankans loyal to British interests was to be nurtured. Meanwhile local languages such as Sinhala and Tamil had little or no economic value or symbolic

capital (Dharmadasa 1992; Peebles 2006; Wickremasuriya 1976). Both Dharmapala and Bandaranaike were products of this English education system.

If English education was conceived as a form of ideological indoctrination, it also produced unanticipated effects. At one level it led English-educated Sri Lankans to engage more deeply with their culture, language and history. For instance, in the mid nineteenth century James de Alwis (1823–78) studied Sinhala language and culture and expressed feelings of language and cultural loyalty. He was also critical of the anglicism produced by English-medium education (Dharmadasa 1992, 40–1). De Alwis was a pioneer in this respect; in subsequent years other members of the English-educated elite adopted similar interests. The English-stream educational system also produced figures like Dharmapala, who used English to selectively criticise aspects of British rule and to connect with pan-Asian and international Buddhist networks. A similar process was also unfolding in the high-caste Tamil community in Jaffna, where figures like the Hindu revivalist Arumuga Navalar, who too received an English education, advocated a return to tradition (Schalk 2010, 106–30). Later in the twentieth century we see in Bandaranaike an explicit, if unsuccessful, attempt to break from this anglophone heritage.

The early twentieth century also saw flourishing Sinhala literary activity in a ‘print culture’ that was initially enabled by Christian missionaries translating and publishing religious material. Buddhist presses also appeared in the nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century secular vernacular publishing, particularly in the Sinhala language, became a burgeoning industry (Frost 2002, 954–5; Dharmadasa 1992, 155–88; Wickramasinghe 2006, 78–81). Although official education policy did not support Sinhala or Tamil languages or culture, people exploited the colonial economy to ‘modernise’ and articulate their cultural practices in new and innovative ways. The impact of colonial modernity through constitutional, administrative and educational changes therefore had a distinctly uneven impact on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Sri Lanka. ‘Colonial modernity’ was not a homogeneous or overmastering discourse that circumscribed all aspects of life on the island.

The census and political institutionalisation of identities

As part of the larger discourse of colonial modernity, the formation of colonial knowledge systems and their impact on local identity politics

have been a major focus in Sri Lankan scholarship (Jeganathan 1995; Rajasingham-Senanayake 1999; Wickramasinghe 1995). This follows in the tradition of Bernard Cohn's (1997) work on India. Recent scholarship has questioned the degree to which colonial knowledge penetrated Sri Lankan society (Blackburn 2010; Wickramasinghe 2014). Nonetheless, colonial knowledge construction and its assimilation by the nationalist elite remain important to the question of authenticity and nationalism. The colonial census, in particular, played a significant role in how the British understood and therefore intervened in local society.

The British both reorganised and also drew on existing patterns of identity. In the first two censuses in 1818 and 1824 the main principles of categorisation were caste and religion – both categories familiar to the British through their encounter with India. But caste was used in a very vague and indistinct sense in these early enumeration exercises. The 1824 census listed regional groups like Europeans, Portuguese and Malays; occupational groups like washers or potters; and large amorphous groups like Moors and Malabars as 'castes' (Wickramasinghe 1995, 5). Even when the British used traditional caste labels like *goyigama* the usage tended to bind the caste group, identifying *goyigama* strictly with occupation as cultivators whereas not all *goyigama* people were cultivators (Wickramasinghe 1995, 5–6).

Although caste and religion structured the initial British view of Ceylon, the British also considered the Ceylonese situation to be a counterpoint to India. Whereas in India religious divisions appeared sharp, the coexistence of Hindu, Muslim, Christian and spirit-belief alongside a dominant Theravada Buddhist tradition in Ceylon suggested a more accommodative society (Wickramasinghe 1995, 5–10). Unlike the rivalry between the Hindu and Muslim religions in India, there seemed in Ceylon to be more commonality between the Hindus and Buddhists, who shared a common pantheon of 'minor' gods. In terms of caste too the British could not perceive the kind of pollution and hierarchy consciousness they found in India. But in reality caste did play a major role in Sinhala society in the nineteenth century (Rogers 2004).

'Race' and 'nation' enter the classification vocabulary with the 1871 census. In 1871 the census lists 78 nations and 24 races. Here too there is incoherence in the classification regime because Sinhalese and Tamil are classed as nationalities as well as races. 'Nation' also seems to have been used loosely to describe numerically small groups like 'West-Indians' and 'Abyssinians' who were considered too insignificant to be classed as races (Wickramasinghe 1995, 7). In the 1881 census the early experimentation with categories gives way to race as the dominant category. By 1881 the

racess are down to seven and the census categories have become somewhat similar to those of today, though 'nation' continues to be used till 1912. The 'races' in the 1881 census are: Europeans, Sinhalese, Tamils, Moors, Malays, Veddahs and Others (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1999, 112). From 1881 onwards these racial categories begin to form the basis of the island's official identity discourse and they continue to do so in the postcolonial period, with only minor variations and the replacement of the label 'race' with 'ethnicity'.

Classifying colonial populations was largely an academic exercise in the early nineteenth century. Later, with liberal imperialist efforts to include 'natives' in governance, these identities took on a more political and institutional role. This led some groups in the local population to claim to be representatives of their communities (Wickramasinghe 2006, 50). In colonial Ceylon this is visible in the British practice of nominating elite members from various ethnic groups as communal or racial representatives (Nissan and Stirrat 1990, 28). This system of representation was a gesture towards participatory governance and also a means of enlisting the support of important elite groups for colonial governance.

Under the communal representation system the number of local representatives in the Legislative Council did not reflect the numerical strength of the communities they represented. From the 1830s to 1889 there were three Europeans, one Sinhalese, one Tamil and one Burgher/Eurasian (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1999, 114). Reforms introduced in 1889 created Kandyan and Low Country Sinhalese seats, doubling Sinhala representation. At the same time, a Moor seat was added. After 1912 a seat was introduced for an 'educated Ceylonese representative'. Thus the initial practice of granting parity to Sinhalese and Tamil representatives was altered, resulting in dissatisfaction among the Tamil elite. When the Donoughmore Commissioners reasoned in 1931 that communal representation was a regressive and anachronistic feature of politics in Sri Lanka, the Tamil elite stridently objected, expressing fears of a 'tyranny of the majority'. The longstanding practice of communal representation, which had begun to become eroded owing to changes since 1912, was overturned in 1931 and the Tamil elite, used to a large share of power not determined by their community's numerical strength, suddenly found themselves facing an uncertain future.

The idea that the elite were representatives of their respective communities flattened internal differences and allowed the elite to represent their interests as the interests of the larger group. The Kandyan elite, for instance, used this British perception to position themselves

as representatives of the Kandyan peasantry, even though there was a significant divergence between their interests and the peasantry's. The elite wanted education and wealth but the peasantry's more immediate concerns were land, labour and food (Wickramasinghe 2006, 56). The Kandyan elite's claim to speak on behalf of the peasantry also foreshadowed a structural feature of Sri Lankan politics in the last decades of British imperialism. When the Donoughmore Commission was deliberating granting universal franchise in 1927, there was stiff opposition from the Ceylon National Congress (CNC), a loosely structured political association of elite figures. A young S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was a member of the CNC delegation to the Donoughmore Commission in 1927, which opposed universal suffrage and argued that the vote should be restricted based on literacy, property, income and gender (de Silva 1981, 418–21). However, once universal franchise was granted in 1931, CNC politicians increasingly positioned themselves as 'representatives' of their ethnic communities.

Although universal franchise did not result in a sudden radical transformation of Sri Lankan politics, it did compel the local elite including the Low Country Sinhala elite to engage more directly with the communities they claimed to represent. This is reflected in the way the Sinhala elite increasingly presented themselves as benevolent custodians of peasant interests – guided by romantic misconceptions about the rural economy and the social structure of the peasantry (Moore 1992; Samaraweera 1981). These changes in the political system are also reflected in the theme of rural reconstruction – ranging from paddy cultivation to ambitious irrigation projects – which became a major feature of Sri Lankan politics from the 1940s to the 1980s. The story of how the rural and the peasant became invested with a notion of national authenticity is explored in detail in my chapters on Bandaranaike and Amarasekara and in the conclusion to this book, but I discuss below how reconstructions of Sri Lanka's past also fed discourses of authenticity and shaped the emergence of a historically grounded Sinhala self-consciousness.

History, the past and authenticity

In colonial Ceylon serious historical research began in the early nineteenth century. The earliest British 'histories' of the island are merely impressionistic accounts like Robert Percival's *An Account of the Island* (1805). One of the most significant events in the colonial historiography of Ceylon was the 'discovery' of the Pali language *vamsas* or chronicles,

chief among them the *Mahavamsa* (loosely translated as the ‘Greater Chronicle’). In an intellectual milieu that privileged written sources over oral narratives, the existence of these chronicles generated much excitement and intellectual curiosity. The discovery, translation and the transformation of these chronicles into historiography reveal a process whereby textual sources were reified and oral histories became gradually displaced. In Donald Lopez’s (1995) evocative term colonial scholars became ‘curators’ of local tradition and culture.

The earliest British translation of the *Mahavamsa* was by a non-specialist, amateur philologist named Edward Upham in 1833. It was harshly critiqued by George Turnour, a civil servant, who later earned a reputation as a pioneering Pali scholar through his own translation and publication of the *Mahavamsa* in 1837 – a translation that achieved definitive status in the field of Pali studies (Walters and Colley 2006, 135–7). Turnour’s critique of Upham’s work centred mainly on the significant lapses and distortions created by the latter’s lack of knowledge of both Sinhala and Pali and his reliance on native interpreters instead of accessing the texts in their original form. Walters and Colley (2006) argue that Turnour’s triumph over Upham, while producing a more ‘accurate’ translation by nineteenth-century philological standards, was also a reification of a purely text-based approach to history. It served to marginalise the role of native informants and priest-scholars, whose views had been taken into consideration in Upham’s translation.

The two most influential histories produced in the nineteenth century, William Knighton’s *History of Ceylon from the Earliest Period to Present Time* (1845) and Sir Emerson Tennent’s two-volume *Ceylon* (1877 [1860]), relied on Turnour’s translation for information on the precolonial period. These works became standard reference works throughout the nineteenth century and helped propagate the *Mahavamsa* as an authoritative historical text in the minds of the English-educated local intelligentsia. As Rogers (1990) suggests, the historical narrative produced by the British scholars posited a three-stage model that closely paralleled the general pattern of European history. It depicted an advanced classical civilisation that went into decline owing to South Indian invasions and natural causes like disease and drought and was succeeded by a kind of a dark middle age that ended with the intervention of European colonisation. Further progress, in this model, depended on the changes introduced by colonisation, thus rationalising conquest. Most local scholars uncritically adopted this model (Rogers 1990). Though they debated specific issues, like which ethnic group had contributed more to the country’s precolonial development, the basic model was accepted.

Both British and local historians also projected modern notions of nationality and ethnicity on to the precolonial past of the country.

The *Mahavamsa* imaginary speaks out strongly in the writing of Dharmapala, Bandaranaike and Amarasekara and has been a source of historical legitimacy for Sinhala nationalism throughout Sri Lanka's post-independence history (Kemper 1991). The reification of the *Mahavamsa* as a historical source, and the Buddhist ideological emphasis it encodes, has had a significant impact on Sinhala nationalism. The *Mahavamsa* is believed to have been authored some time in the fifth or sixth century by the Buddhist monk Mahanama and is a mytho-historical text that chronicles Buddhist kingship in Sri Lanka. In modern nationalist interpretations the text is understood to establish an intimate link between the land, Buddhism and the Sinhala people. The *Mahavamsa* narrative is often seen as portraying the Sinhalese as a chosen race that will safeguard the Buddhist religion in Sri Lanka long after the Buddha's passing away. Modern historians like K. M. de Silva tend to promote this view. De Silva in his reading of the *Mahavamsa* is suspicious of the chronicle's chronology but reinforces the nationalist view of the land-religion-people relationship. He argues that the author of the *Mahavamsa* contrives to synchronise the passing away of the Buddha and a missive he is supposed to have issued to the supreme god Sakra to protect Prince Vijaya – the mytho-historical founding figure of the Sinhala race – and his retinue on their journey to Sri Lanka, though the two events are separated by at least half a century (de Silva 1981, 3–4). This idea of a chosen race, which functions as a kind of Malinowskian charter myth (Gunawardana 1990, 55), has been highly influential in post-independence Sinhala politics.

In addition to the notion of a charter myth, episodes from the chronicle have been reinterpreted to provide historical 'evidence' of a longstanding enmity between the Sinhala and Tamil communities. The depiction of King Dutugemunu, a second-century Sinhala king, as defeating the South Indian king Elara, believed to be from the Chola dynasty, is understood in populist nationalist discourse as symbolic deliverance of the nation from alien bondage. It has had particular resonance in times of conflict. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the Dutugemunu myth was largely about Sinhala historical pride stretching back 2,500 years. But with the escalation of Sinhala-Tamil conflict in post-independence Sri Lanka – and particularly in the aftermath of the 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom and the rise of militant Tamil nationalism – the Dutugemunu-Elara incident began to signify a historical enmity between the Sinhala and Tamil communities and was also mobilised to serve a 'just war' ideology whereby Sinhala violence against the Tamil

community was rationalised on the basis of a just war waged to protect the Buddhist religion and the Sinhala nation (Obeyesekere 1995; 2005; Bartholomuesz 1999).

The influence of historical consciousness in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was not simply confined to English-speaking intelligentsia or bookish scholarly activity focused on chronicles. Other discourses of authenticity which drew on a similar historical imaginary were spreading in different domains of cultural and social activity. The vibrant Sinhala drama associated with the Tower Hall theatre in the early 1900s was one highly popular arena in which authentic notions of modern Sinhala identity were fashioned (Field 2017; de Mel 2001; Wickramasinghe 2006). The Tower Hall theatre was opened by Anagarika Dharmapala on 6 December 1911 (de Mel 2001, 64). John de Silva and Charles Dias were the two major names associated with the 'Tower Hall plays'. De Silva, a former schoolteacher, combined the Parsi *nurti* theatre tradition, popular throughout South Asia at the time, with the *nadagam* folk tradition of Sri Lanka. He also incorporated elements of Western theatre, such as a proscenium stage and elaborate set designs (de Mel 2001, 64–5). De Silva's first play, *Sri Vickrama Rajasinghe*, in 1906, celebrated the life of the last king of Kandy and was published as a booklet, which had sold over 16,000 copies by 1925 (de Mel 2001, 65). Most of de Silva's plays were based on the Buddhist *jataka* story tradition and were didactic, featuring chaste women and themes about temperance, a major middle-class cause at the time. Despite its Buddhist themes de Silva's theatre was patronised and funded by many Sinhala Christians (de Mel 2001, 65) – a fact suggestive of the relative flexibility in the early twentieth century between Sinhala and Buddhist as distinct categories, with these becoming more rigid in the mid twentieth century.

Many of de Silva's plays also celebrated the popular notion that the Sinhalese were of North Indian origin – or the idea of the *arya* Sinhala race. Concomitant to the *Mahavamsa* and its mytho-historical account of Sinhala origins was philological work being carried out by European scholars like Wilhelm Geiger, who classified Sinhala as an Indo-European language and Tamil as a Dravidian language, a conclusion that drew on Max Müller's views on Indo-Aryan migration (Field 2017, 38–40). Many Sinhala scholars of the time believed that the Sinhala people were of Aryan, North Indian origin because both European philological scholarship and the *Mahavamsa* narrative supported this view. The desire to claim Aryan status, one could also speculate, had something to do with colonial racial discourse and the affinity Sinhala people could claim with a racial stock common to

Europeans and Asians. The *arya* Sinhala discourse regularly features in Dharmapala's writing, especially when he appeals to the colonial government to protect Sinhala society and culture.

Alongside the Sinhala theatre was a thriving popular Sinhala literary culture. In the early 1900s periodicals such as *Sinhala Jathiya* (Sinhala Race) (1903), founded by the prolific writer Piyadasa Sirisena (Dharmadasa 1992, 127), and *Sinhala Bauddhaya* (Sinhala Buddhist) (1906), founded by Dharmapala, were highly popular (Wickramasinghe 2006, 78). These print publications had a wide circulation and popularised ideas about Sinhala history, culture and identity. Like theatre, print publications were a site where ideas about modernity and tradition converged. For instance, Dharmapala published a small pamphlet entitled *Gihī Vinaya* (Code for the Laity) which infused standards of Victorian morality and etiquette with Buddhist values of selfhood (Obeyesekere 1976). Serialised novels were also a popular form of entertainment and instruction. Piyadasa Sirisena wrote over twenty very popular Sinhala novels which had didactic themes about protecting Sinhala identity by resisting westernisation, vice and amoral behaviour. Despite their didacticism many of these novels can be seen as stories about modern Sinhala subjects trying to navigate a complex and changing world.

The flurry of activity in the early twentieth century centring on Sinhala language and culture also produced oppositional discourses of authenticity. From the 1930s to the 1940s an influential language reform movement emerged. It also had nationalist implications. Led by the charismatic Munidasa Cumaratunga, whose popular Sinhala-grammar instruction books are standard reading in schools even today, the *hela* (indigenous) movement gathered force in the 1930s. Cumaratunga, who left his job as an Anglo-Vernacular schools inspector, was an ardent language loyalist. Through a close and intense study of classical Sinhala writing, Cumaratunga identified what he considered 'corruptions', particularly owing to Sanskrit borrowings. He advocated the purification of the Sinhala language (Coperahewa 2011; Field 2017, 36). What began as a linguistic movement grew into a cultural-nationalist movement when Cumaratunga, along with Rapiyel Tennekoon, formed the *Hela Havula* (Hela Fraternity) in 1941. This organisation directly challenged the *arya*-Sinhala thesis and argued for autochthonous origins of the Sinhala as a people and their language and culture.

Cumaratunga also publicly challenged Wilhelm Geiger, who was involved in compiling a Sinhala etymological dictionary. He argued that there were many words of pure Sinhala origin and that Geiger was misguided in trying to trace the origins of all Sinhala words to Pali and

Sanskrit (Coperahewa 2011, 17). Cumaratunga's public engagements with Sinhala language and culture attracted a popular following, but after his death in 1944 the movement floundered. Though the *hela* ideology survived among a small group of Sinhala intellectuals, it did not evolve into a major cultural-nationalist project in post-independence Sri Lanka. Cumaratunga's pioneering work, however, did influence the demand for linguistic rights in the 1940s and the eventual controversial elevation of Sinhala as the sole official language in 1956 (Coperahewa 2011, 34). Cumaratunga, as a member of the *Sinhala Maha Sabha* (Great Association of the Sinhalese) formed by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike in 1936, used his influence to lobby for the cause of the Sinhala language and culture. He defeated a motion by Bandaranaike to change the name of the organisation to *Swadesiya Maha Sabha* (Great Association of the Indigenes), to gain the support of non-Sinhala communities, and ensured that the elevation of the Sinhala language remained a policy priority (Coperahewa 2011, 31). However, the *Mahavamsa*-based narrative of Sinhala identity, which had a longer history and more institutional and scholarly support, gained hegemonic status in post-independence Sri Lanka.

Monumentalising the past: colonial archaeology

While Pali chronicles like the *Mahavamsa* furnished textual details of a glorious classical Sinhala civilisation, colonial archaeology helped give it plausibility (Rogers 1990, 102). As Pradeep Jeganathan (1995, 106–36) suggests, colonial archaeological investigation and historiography were mutually constitutive discourses in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka. Around the same time that the *Mahavamsa* and other chronicles were discovered and translated by European scholars, the area known today as the North Central Province (NCP) was being opened up to facilitate the migration of South Indian labour for work in the plantation economy. Up to this point the sparsely inhabited NCP had attracted little interest but, as road construction began in the area, ruins of the ancient city of Anuradhapura were discovered (Jeganathan 1995). Anuradhapura receives much narrative space in the *Mahavamsa* as the site through which Buddhism was consecrated in the island and the tradition of political patronage for the religion was instituted. The discovery of the ruins gave physical corroboration to the *Mahavamsa* and helped further establish the plausibility of the chronicle's narrative in the minds of colonial historiographers and their later local counterparts.

The size and scale of the various ruins and their aesthetic qualities were a source of wonderment to the colonial gaze. The archaeological discourse about Sri Lanka's past continues to wield significant influence in the present and has also entered popular consciousness as part of the grand narrative of the Sinhala people. The importance of Anuradhapura in the spatial imagination of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism is evident in the number of religio-political events that centre on the city. Anagarika Dharmapala and his protégé Walisinha Harischandra were instrumental in lobbying to secure Anuradhapura as an exclusively Buddhist religious site in the early twentieth century. The utilisation of the symbolic capital of Anuradhapura has continued with Sinhala political parties choosing the site for inaugurating political campaigns. Successive post-independence governments have also invested heavily in developing the infrastructure of the historic sites in and around Anuradhapura through highly publicised projects that attempt to draw upon the practice of Sinhala kings who patronised such religious sites.

Buddhism and Sinhala identity

Coinciding with the production of this body of historical knowledge and socio-economic changes wrought by British colonial rule was the emergence of what is known as the nineteenth-century 'Buddhist revival'. This movement gathered force through Buddhist resistance to evangelical Christianity in the early to mid nineteenth century (Malalgoda 1976, 173). Many scholars have viewed this movement as being largely shaped by the very discourse it was seeking to oppose. This view is most visible in the 'Protestant Buddhism' thesis, which argues that Buddhism in Sri Lanka, in the process of modernising itself, took on Protestant Christian elements such as a text-based doctrinal emphasis, a distinct role for lay Buddhist activism as opposed to the traditional role of the *sangha*, and a kind of missionary zeal (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Moreover, many lay Buddhist activists adopted Western 'rationalist' interpretations of Buddhism (Hallisey 1995). The influence of Theosophy on Sri Lankan Buddhism and Buddhist activism was also employed to support this thesis (Prothero 1995).

This view has been reassessed in much contemporary scholarship (Abeysekara 2002; Blackburn 2010). Although there were significant changes to Buddhist practice in the nineteenth century, there were also significant continuities. Sri Lankan Buddhists were not simply in confrontation and conversation with the West; they were also in dialogue with

many other local and pan-Asian Buddhist networks – a dynamic feature of Buddhism that predated colonial contact (Blackburn 2001; 2010). As we shall see in the chapter on Dharmapala, the Buddhist world in which Dharmapala moved was a multifaceted one (Kemper 2015). He was able to forge solidarities with Buddhists in Japan and India, but at the same time his attempts to establish Buddhist control over Buddhagaya, believed to be the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, resulted in confrontation with Hindus and also disenchantment with the Theosophists who wanted to form a grand ecumenical alliance of Asian religions (Prothero 1995).

For later twentieth-century developments in Sinhala nationalism the Buddhist revival has a number of implications. At one level was the stronger emphasis placed on Buddhism and Sinhala as unified and indivisible. With the rise of historical consciousness the island's past was seen as primarily a Sinhala Buddhist one. This did not have direct political consequences in the nineteenth century, but became a political issue in the twentieth. The twinning of Sinhala and Buddhist identities is visible in Dharmapala's rhetoric and had political implications in the twentieth century when a number of politicians, including S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, converted to Buddhism with the granting of universal franchise in 1931, in order to 'authenticate' their public image. They were disparagingly called 'Donoughmore Buddhists' (Ames 1963, 45–53).

Buddhist activism in the nineteenth century also anticipates the much more overtly political Buddhism that emerges in the mid twentieth century. As a number of scholars have argued, the line between lay Buddhist activism and the *sangha* was increasingly blurred over the course of the twentieth century (Seneviratne 1999; Tambiah 1992). Though some of this scholarship draws problematic distinctions between 'true' Buddhism and Buddhism corrupted by its contact with politics (Abeysekara 2002), it nevertheless documents an important shift in the public role of Buddhism. Activist Buddhist monks like Yakkaduwe Pannarama and Walpola Rahula from the Vidyalankara Pirivena emerged as dominant voices in the public sphere in the 1940s (Seneviratne 1999, 128–30). Walpola Rahula in particular argued that politics was a sphere of legitimate engagement for Buddhist monks (Rahula 2003, 123). Although Buddhism has had increasing visibility in public life in post-independence Sri Lanka, a consistent theme of Buddhist beleaguerment – nestled within the larger narrative of Sinhala beleaguerment – has also been visible.

This theme featured sharply in the Buddhist Commission Report published in 1956 (All Ceylon Buddhist Congress 2006 [1956]). The

report lamented the lack of state support for Buddhism under colonial rule and saw the rebuilding of Buddhist institutions as an urgent post-colonial task. Although a specific clause was incorporated into the 1972 Republican Constitution giving Buddhism the 'foremost place', there has been a constant tussle between politically active members of the *sangha* and the state over the *sangha's* public role. In recent decades the *sangha* has also directly entered politics, a number of monks having entered parliament. Moreover, a particularly militant brand of Buddhist activism emerged in post-war Sri Lanka. However, Buddhist activism in the twentieth century has not been defined only by political engagement. There has been a consistent strand of Buddhist activism relating to social service (Seneviratne 1999, 128–30). Activist Buddhist monks have also championed non-Sinhala nationalist causes. For instance, Maduluwawe Sobihta, who in the 1980s was considered the face of nationalist Buddhist activism, in the last decade of his life increasingly stood for principles of good governance and democracy (Seneviratne 2015).

Post-independence: the rise of Sinhala nationalism

By 1948, when Sri Lanka gained formal independence from the British Empire, a clear sense of majority and minority had begun to emerge in the country. The story from here onwards, as Sinhala nationalism would have it, is the reconquest of the nation by its rightful heirs, the Sinhala Buddhists who were victims of colonial oppression for over four centuries. The narrative of representative democracy has provided strong rationalisation for this majoritarian argument. The normalisation of this narrative is so pervasive that democracy is often equated with majority domination. For instance, H. L. D. Mahindapala, a Sinhalese journalist based in Australia, writes, 'the population of the Sinhalese, according to the provisional data of the last census held in 2001, is 81.89% ... It is a fact of democratic norms that the majority community dominates the government in any country' (Mahindapala 2007). Unfortunately, this tendency is visible in both scholarship sympathetic to the nationalist cause and scholarship critical of Sinhala nationalism (Oberst 2006).

As Ranajit Guha (1997, 4–5) has suggested, what characterises the transition from colonial state to independent state is not so much a decisive rupture as continuity. The nationalist bourgeoisie who inherited power from the colonial state share a similar worldview to their former masters and tend to replicate the ideology of inclusion–exclusion that

characterised colonialism. Legislation enacted in 1948 and 1949 demarcating citizenship in the newly independent state symbolised the new order of inclusion and exclusion. If the colonial state operated on the basis of marking out boundaries making certain identities more legitimate than others, the independent state was no different. With the Ceylon Citizenship Act of 1948, Indian Tamils, mostly brought in colonial times to work in plantations, were denied citizenship, even though they formed about 12 per cent of the population. But the cynical bourgeois character of the post-independence state was made apparent in the Pakistani and Indian Resident Act of the same year, which allowed those with property and education in these communities to claim citizenship (Wickramasinghe 2006, 161–2).

The making of a bipolar Tamil–Sinhala nationalist discourse

The election of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike on a populist Sinhala–Buddhist nationalist platform in 1956 marked a significant turning point in the rise of Sinhala nationalism. As we shall see in the chapter on Bandaranaike, his relationship to this discourse was strained. However, in the nationalist platform that gathered momentum around Bandaranaike’s victory, one sees a coming together of the different strands of authenticity in Sinhala language and culture and the Buddhist revival of the early twentieth century. Though Bandaranaike was no different from the elite Sinhala politicians who preceded him, the populist forces that backed his victory point to a broadening and deepening of Sinhala nationalism as a wider socio-political movement in mid twentieth-century Sri Lanka. This is a major reason why Sinhala nationalist intellectuals like Gunadasa Amarasekara continue to revisit 1956 as a key moment in the hagiography of Sinhala nationalism.

From 1956 onwards Sinhala nationalist dominance was exerted over many spheres of life on the island. Following Bandaranaike’s assassination in 1959, his widow, Sirimavo Bandaranaike became prime minister in 1960. Marking the growing institutionalisation of majoritarianism, she declared that ‘The Tamil people must accept the fact that the Sinhala majority will no longer permit themselves to be cheated of their rights’ (Sirimavo Bandaranaike, *Tribune*, 7 May 1967, cited in Wickramasinghe 2006, 161). The idea that the Sinhalese were historically denied their rightful position in the nation was systematically exploited by successive Sinhala-dominated governments to cement Sinhala and

Buddhist domination in many institutional and social aspects of life in independent Sri Lanka.

Mechanisms usually used by liberal states to guarantee equal opportunities for minorities were adopted in favour of the majority. This move was justified by the idea that the Sinhalese were a threatened group (Wickramasinghe 2006, 182). This sense of endangerment, as suggested earlier, is driven by a narrative of beleaguerment which perceives various internal and external threats to Sinhala identity. Chief among them is the idea of a pan-Dravidian threat posed by the geographical proximity of the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, which has a large Tamil population with certain linguistic and cultural affinities to Sri Lankan Tamils.

In 1972 the constitution was amended to make Sri Lanka a fully independent republic and Buddhism was accorded the 'foremost position' among religions. The constitutional enshrinement of Buddhism only legalised what was already evident in public life – the growing influence of a politicised Buddhism in the public sphere. The year 1972 also saw a change in education policy, significantly reducing the Tamil student intake into science and technology courses in universities – a traditional path of social mobility for Tamil students from the north and east of the country (de Silva 1984). This institutional marginalisation of the Tamil community was paralleled by social insecurity owing to periodic ethnic riots that culminated in the 1983 riots that saw thousands of Tamil civilians killed or displaced and their homes and livelihoods destroyed.

The dominant strand of Tamil nationalism that rose against Sinhala oppression also became increasingly majoritarian in conception and practice (Ismail 2000). It sought to project Tamils as the only minority community with a rightful national claim, ignoring the rights of smaller communities like the Muslims. After 1983 the conflict turned into a secessionist war, which was bloodily concluded in 2009. Post-war Sri Lanka remains a troubled place where Sinhala nationalism expresses itself in different forms – particularly through Islamophobia. Though the immediate threat of Tamil militancy is over, Sinhala nationalism continues to see itself as beleaguered and vulnerable. As a result, state reform and the devolution of power have remained highly contentious issues.

Conclusion

The story I have charted so far traces in broad brushstrokes the main lineaments of a complex set of socio-historical shifts that have shaped

Sinhala nationalism and authenticity over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries different arenas of action informed the construction of a modern politicised Sinhala identity. Sinhala identity and Buddhism were not as closely allied in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as they are today. The twinning of these two categories is reflective of a process through which an ethno-nationalist imaginary became established and a notion of Sinhala Buddhist authenticity gained hegemonic influence. It is tempting to read this as an evolutionary story – of a relatively open and tolerant past giving way to a parochial nationalist present. In some strains of anti-nationalist criticism this is visible in how the idea of ‘Ceylonese nationalism’ is invoked as an inclusive counterpoint to today’s ethno-nationalist politics (Cheran 2009, xxii). But such a reading can obscure how the past was also divided and divisive – on caste, class and religious lines, if not necessarily on the basis of ethnicity or race.

The normative understanding of the nation as an ‘imagined community’ of citizens and the idea that nations are like organisms that evolve and take shape over time (Brubaker 1996; Wimmer and Schiller 2003) underlie the vision of a tolerant past versus an intolerant nationalist present. Nationalism as a category of analysis, as I discussed in the introduction, affords limited analytical purchase, but nationalism as a category of practice – as in what nationalists ‘think’ and ‘do’ or how institutionalised practices reify the nation – does provide critical insight (Brubaker 1996, 15). Whether one thinks of a ‘Ceylonese nation’ or a ‘Sinhala Buddhist nation’, these categories do not exist outside the nationalist imagination or outside the way they are reproduced in institutional practice. Therefore, accounting for the existence of nationalist thinking needs to be separated from assuming the existence of nationalism or nation as ontological fact. What I have traced in this chapter is how the notion of a Sinhala nation began to circulate and the institutional and cultural dynamics that sustain its circulation. Authenticity is an integral part of the circulation of this nationalist imaginary. Examining how the discourse of authenticity shifts and morphs across the lives of the nationalist intellectuals I document in this book is one way in which nationalism can be seen as a category of practice rather than a category of analysis. In doing this it is important to keep in mind the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of authenticity.

The cultural imaginary of authenticity and the sense of mourning it generates have animated and moulded the postcolonial career of Sinhala nationalism (Spencer 1990, 290). It is not a singular discourse

and it morphed and transformed across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But underlying it is a structure of feeling that the present is inauthentic – compelling nationalist thinkers to look longingly back at a pristine precolonial past. As Ranajit Guha expresses it in the Indian context, ‘Whenever I hear the phrase *colonial India*, it hurts me. It hurts like an injury that has healed and yet has retained somehow a trace of the original pain’ (Guha 1998, 85, emphasis original). But it is also a pain that nationalism, as Guha with wry cynicism points out, appropriates to create ‘a cult of mourning’ (Guha 1998, 98). Though Guha does not elaborate what he means precisely by ‘mourning’, I understand it to be a pervasive idiom and culture of loss – the kind of pathos that Spencer (1990) refers to – that nationalism creates. Nationalism keeps this memory of colonial pain alive and recycles it – always seeking to go beyond the moment of colonial encounter to recover a lost past. Aamir Mufti calls it an ‘aura’ of ‘authenticity’ (Mufti 2000, 87–8). What this ‘aura’ of authenticity meant in different historical contexts and the protean forms it took we shall see in the following chapters as I track the notion of authenticity across the three figures of Anagarika Dharmapala, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and Gunadasa Amarasekara.

3

Anagarika Dharmapala: the nation and its place in the world

Introduction

By age 38 Anagarika Dharmapala – born Don David Hewavitharana in 1864 to a family of wealthy Sinhala entrepreneurs – had travelled three times to the United States of America and made a significant impression as a Buddhist representative at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago alongside the charismatic Hindu preacher Swami Vivekananda. He had also visited Japan thrice, a country that he admired for its ability to straddle tradition and modernity, acquired a lifelong benefactor named Mrs Mary Foster in Hawaii and initiated legal proceedings to establish Buddhist control over the holy site of Buddhagaya (Guruge 1991 [1965], xxxvii–xliii). He went on to live for a further 31 years, during which time he continued to travel extensively, sought to establish industrial education in Sri Lanka and attempted to modernise the Buddhist clergy and lay Buddhist practices in the country. He was also suspected of sedition in 1915 and not allowed to return to Sri Lanka for five years. He died in Saranath, Benares in 1933, soon after becoming an ordained Buddhist monk. Dharmapala’s life was remarkable and varied and characterised by a restless transnational imaginary that continuously shuttled between home and the world. But in independent Sri Lanka Dharmapala is known largely as a Buddhist reformer and ardent Sinhala nationalist patriot (Amunugama 1985; 1991; 2016; Guruge 1991 [1965]; Karunaratne 1964; Obeyesekere 1976) or a fundamentalist zealot who hated all things non-Buddhist and non-Sinhala (Jayawardena 2003; Roberts 2000). What is attempted here is an untangling of the ‘historical’ Dharmapala from the ‘ideological’ Dharmapala. In Sinhala nationalist discourse the ideological Dharmapala is a heroic anti-colonial figure and a man who signifies an organic link to an authentic Sinhala past. In much liberal scholarship the

ideological Dharmapala is an equally originary figure representative of racist and exclusivist Sinhala majoritarianism.

The two positions, though politically opposed, ironically mirror each other. One affirms authenticity by romanticising Dharmapala; the other implicitly upholds Dharmapala's nationalist authenticity by failing to account for his historical complexity. Was Dharmapala himself interested and invested in a sense of authenticity? If so, what shape and form did it take? Why and how does post-independence Sinhala nationalism see Dharmapala as a nationalist father figure? And why does liberal scholarship take Dharmapala as a master signifier of Sinhala nationalist thinking? These are the key questions explored here. First I position Dharmapala in his historical context; then I trace his own relationship to Sinhala identity, Buddhism and other ethnic and religious communities of his time; and finally I look at Dharmapala's contemporary afterlife as a nationalist father figure. By doing so I demonstrate that the authenticity ascribed to Dharmapala is a shifting and malleable idea that arises from present-day concerns about nationalism. As we shall see in the chapter on Gunadasa Amarasekara, Dharmapala's nationalist reconstruction flattens the multidimensionality of his life – ascribing to him a nationalist authenticity that is rarely visible in the life he lived or the world in which he moved. In Sinhala nationalist teleology Dharmapala is *the* originary figure – the person who intuitively tapped into a millennia-old consciousness of Sinhala-ness and 'revived' it for a project of postcolonial nation-building. Yet, as we shall see, for Dharmapala authenticity meant many things shaped by his immediate historical context. Authenticity, like nationalism, therefore appears 'real' and 'tangible' when viewed from within, but, viewed from outside, its ontological existence collapses. The critical task is to explore the protean manifestations of authenticity and what informs it – without succumbing to its allure or dismissing it as mere fantasy.

Contextualising Dharmapala's life and career

The historical period in which Dharmapala emerged as a leading Buddhist activist and public figure was one in which a modern Sinhala identity was in the making. In scholarship – as discussed in the introduction and the [Chapter 2](#) – there are some standard frames through which this period is understood. What I do below is to look at the significant contexts of Dharmapala's life, such as his class background, the Buddhist 'revival' and his overseas Buddhist activism, to counter

received wisdom and to provide a sense of the complex and contradictory forces that shaped his life. In doing so, my general approach follows Steven Kemper's (2015) argument about the need to 'rescue' Dharmapala from the 'nation'. However, my overall approach in the chapter differs from Kemper's by critically exploring the reasons why Dharmapala is positioned as an authentic representative of Sinhala and Buddhist identity in subsequent nationalist reconstructions: it is not enough to 'rescue' Dharmapala from the nation; it is also important to see how Dharmapala as an ideology becomes part of Sinhala nationalist discourse.

Dharmapala's father, the Mudaliyar Don Carolis, was a successful furniture manufacturer and retailer (Jayawardena 2003, 153). He was a man from a middle-class rural background who married into a family of landowners and entrepreneurs and managed to establish himself financially by taking advantage of opportunities for trade created by the colonial economy. Despite the relative privilege of his background, Dharmapala appears to have had a difficult childhood. Roberts (1997, 1012) notes that he was born with a deformed leg, which may have exposed him to bullying and discrimination as a boy. His schooling was mostly in Christian missionary boarding schools – an experience Dharmapala appears to have disliked. The dominant image of Christian missionaries in Dharmapala's writing is of an excessive and undisciplined lifestyle characterised by the consumption of alcohol and meat: 'The *padres* were great pork-eaters. I thought: "The dirt pigs eat is disgusting. These fellows must be very dirty"' (Guruge 1991 [1965]: 683).

Obeyesekere (1976) interprets Dharmapala's negative view of Christian education as reflecting the problems Buddhist students encountered in the nineteenth-century Christian-dominated education system. As Malalgoda (1976) and Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) point out, establishing a network of Buddhist schools was one of the major elements of Buddhist activism in late nineteenth-century Sri Lanka. Obeyesekere (1976) also suggests that Buddhist entrepreneurs like Don Carolis represented an emergent upwardly mobile class that was attempting to displace the socio-political influence of more established Sinhala Protestant families who wielded greater influence in colonial society. Other scholars, such as Amunugama (1985; 1991; 2016), go a step further and see Dharmapala as a figure representing an 'organic' rural Sinhala Buddhist ethos and its nationalist cultural emergence in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century colonial context.

These interpretations of Dharmapala are consistent with the view that the nineteenth-century 'Buddhist revival' in Sri Lanka served as a nascent nationalist movement in Sinhala society (de Silva 1981;

Dharmadasa 1992; Peebles 2006). However, recent scholarship has complicated this interpretation. Anne Blackburn's (2010) nuanced exploration of Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala – an influential scholar monk who played a key role in the Buddhist revival and was Dharmapala's teacher and mentor – suggests that many other entanglements besides opposition to colonial domination and Christian missionary activity shaped the meaning and form of Buddhism in this period, including debates over monastic control of holy sites, caste controversies and the influence of translocal Buddhist networks that extended to Southeast Asia.

Dharmapala's formal education was limited but he seems to have read widely and eclectically, if not systematically. His schooling ended at age 18 when he joined the Education Department as a clerk. In 1886 he left that job to join the Theosophists. He was attracted to the movement by the charismatic Henry Steele Olcott, the son of a Presbyterian minister, who publicly converted to Buddhism after visiting Sri Lanka in 1880 (Prothero 1996). Dharmapala's emergence as a public religious figure was facilitated by his decision to join the Theosophical Society – a decision that his family initially opposed, but that was swayed by the influence of Helena Blavatsky (Guruge 1991 [1965]), who along with Olcott was a leading figure in the global Theosophical movement.

As Malalgoda (1976) notes, the Theosophical intervention provided a crucial impetus to the Buddhist revival movement that had been initiated by Buddhist monks in the mid nineteenth century. The secular organisational skills needed to broaden the movement were provided by Olcott, who mentored Dharmapala until the pair fell out over personal and ideological disagreements. Dharmapala's break-up with Olcott and Theosophy in general was also related to Dharmapala's focus on promoting Buddhism. He had little interest in Theosophy's emphasis on forging a general alliance of Eastern religions, which Olcott saw as an authentic spiritual counterpoint to Christianity. For Dharmapala, Buddhism alone was authentic. As Prothero (1995, 298) notes, Dharmapala's increasingly anti-Hindu stance became awkward for Olcott. Dharmapala's establishment in 1891 of the Mahabodhi Society, which aimed to secure control of Buddhagaya, the place where the Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment, foreshadowed the later divergence of Theosophical and Buddhist interests. The site was occupied by Hindu priests, and the legal proceedings initiated by Dharmapala to establish Buddhist control threatened to alienate Hindus. Olcott's support for this project was decidedly reluctant (Prothero 1996). However, although Dharmapala fell out with Olcott and the Theosophical

project proper, he maintained a lifelong relationship with Blavatsky and by extension a universalist vision of Buddhism (Kemper 2015, 59).

The universalism of Dharmapala's Buddhist vision and mission was most evident in his 1893 visit to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago – a defining moment in his career. At the Parliament, Dharmapala portrayed Buddhism in universal terms, as a religion that had the capacity to transcend cultural and geographical divisions. This contrasted with his activism in Sri Lanka, where he portrayed Buddhism as much more particularistic and Sinhala-centric (Uyangoda 2016). This duality is not unique to Dharmapala; it is a structural feature of Sinhala nationalism, which often sees Buddhism both as a highly particularistic legacy of the Sinhala community and also as something that gives identity and location to the nation in the global order. However, Dharmapala's universalism abroad and particularism at home undermine the authenticity attributed to him in later nationalist recuperations. Rather than a die-hard nationalist, we may see a man who strategically shifts position to operate in a translocal world. It was also on this 1893 trip to Chicago that Dharmapala first made contact with Mary Foster, one of his major benefactors. By this time Dharmapala had also established contact with Edwin Arnold and Annie Besant – which places him squarely within the discourse of the 'Western' appropriation of Buddhism (Lopez 1995). In much of Dharmapala's writing, the influence of Western intellectuals and scholars is clearly evident. He was attracted to the 'scientific' status their interpretations gave Buddhism, and by the implicit and explicit anti-Christian sentiment in their work.

Parallel to Dharmapala's westward-looking imaginary was a substantial and lifelong connection to India. He first visited Sarnath, Benares and Buddhagaya in 1891 and formed the Buddhagaya Maha Bodhi Society – which became the Maha Bodhi Society – with the express aim of asserting Buddhist control over this holy site (Guruge 1991 [1965], xxxvi). At the same time, Dharmapala established a long-term relationship with the city of Calcutta, at the time the Indian colonial capital, and with the influential community of intellectuals called the Bhadrakok, whose support was significant in the eventual success of the Maha Bodhi Society (Amunugama 2016, 23). In 1892 Dharmapala established the *Maha Bodhi Journal*, which was published from Calcutta. Although Dharmapala spent a major part of his adult life in India and maintained significant relationships with Indian religious and intellectual leaders such as Swami Vivekananda and Iyothee Thass, the South Indian anti-caste activist, he was never part of the socially reformist anti-Dalit Buddhist movement led by B. R. Ambedkar – one of

the most significant modern interpretations of Buddhism in the Indian context. Uyangoda (2016) speculates that this was because of the politically conservative nature of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and its long historical links to the state and institutional structures of governance. However, such a view is shaped by the assumption that Dharmapala was a 'political' figure and a Sinhala nationalist. His lack of interest in the more politically conscious forms of Buddhist activism in India could be attributed to the fact that he was primarily a religious figure.

Dharmapala also maintained strong links with Japan. His first visit to the country was in 1889, when he accompanied Olcott on a trip seeking to unify 'southern' or what was later called Theravada Buddhism with 'northern' (Mahayana) Buddhism (Kemper 2015, 117); another dimension of the universalist aspect of Dharmapala's Buddhism. On this trip Dharmapala seems to have been overshadowed by Olcott, who had more international visibility at the time. Dharmapala's second visit was on his return from Chicago, when he was received with much greater recognition thanks to his reputation as a charismatic Buddhist missionary. This visit saw him touring Japan, giving lectures and talks and meeting with a number of influential Japanese Buddhists (Kemper 2015, 117–21). Dharmapala admired Japan as an Asian country that had achieved modernity and technological progress while preserving its 'spirituality'. He also looked to rich Japanese Buddhists to fund his Buddhist missionary activities in India – particularly in securing control of the Buddhagaya site. Though initially impressed by the Japanese negotiation of modernity within a traditional frame, on later visits he appears to have become disillusioned with what he saw as the impure practices of the Japanese priesthood, such as the consumption of liquor (Kemper 2015, 117). Dharmapala was also not very successful in securing funding for his Indian activities from Japanese donors. One of the reasons for this was that the Japanese saw India as a mythical rather than real place and were unable to reconcile their romantic notions of India with the mundane politics of monastic control for which Dharmapala was seeking funds (Kemper 2015). One significant feature of Dharmapala's connection with the Japanese was that he presented himself to them as a representative of Indian Buddhism rather than as a Sri Lankan Buddhist (Kemper 2015, 119). These transnational and shifting positions adopted by Dharmapala provide an ironic counter-commentary to his later Sinhala nationalist appropriation in post-independence and contemporary Sri Lanka.

Though based in India for much of his adult life, Dharmapala maintained many links with Sri Lanka. He made a number of extensive tours of the island. In 1886 he did a tour with Olcott which, as

the editor of his writings (Guruge 1991 [1965], xxxv) observes, was an eye opener for the young Dharmapala about the conditions of rural Buddhists – a fact that problematises the romantic notion prevalent in popular discourse and scholarship on Dharmapala that he represented a rural Buddhist culture. In 1906, having broken with Olcott and the Theosophical movement, he established the *Sinhala Bauddhaya* newspaper and the Maha Bodhi Press – marking the duality in his career of being universalist abroad and ‘nationalist’ at home. He donated private property and money inherited from his family to establishing Buddhist schools in Sri Lanka and successfully lobbied his benefactress Mrs Forster to donate to educational causes. He wrote and published extensively in English and Sinhala for Sri Lankan audiences. Much of this writing was condescending towards the Sinhala peasantry and reformist and didactic in tone when it came to the Sinhala middle classes. Dharmapala was also keen to see Buddhist monks receive a modern English-language education because he saw this type of education as vital for the global spread of the religion.

Dharmapala was never overtly politically active in Sri Lanka. He appears to have been largely marginalised by the local political elite of the time (Roberts 1997), though hagiographic post-independence accounts attribute to him a subversive political gloss (Karunaratne 1964). One of the reasons this political role is ascribed to Dharmapala owes to the 1915 anti-Muslim riots, which the colonial authorities misconceived as an anti-colonial protest (Roberts 1990). The British authorities jailed a number of prominent Sinhala and Buddhist activists, and also suspected Dharmapala of sedition. He was confined to Calcutta’s city limits for the five years from 1915 to 1920. However, despite the rhetoric of his writing and speeches, Dharmapala saw himself as a loyal subject of the British Empire (Kemper 2015, 19–21). He even donated to British efforts in the First World War by purchasing war bonds, and his tone was deferential in his correspondence with British officials. His critique of colonialism was mostly on moral rather than political grounds. As discussed in [Chapter 3](#) in relation to Bandaranaike, the Ceylonese political elite of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was politically conservative and benefited economically and socially from colonialism. In Dharmapala’s lifetime, elites did not agitate for full independence (Samaraweera 1981). Dharmapala, though not part of the political elite, cannot be abstracted from this larger social and political milieu. As Roberts puts it, ‘Anagarika Dharmapala was occupying the wings of a “cathedral” where the nave that fronted up to the “British” altar was occupied in the period 1880–1930 by personnel committed – no doubt in varying measures

to – Ceylonese nationalism’ (Roberts 1997, 1012). In the latter part of his life Dharmapala distanced himself from Sri Lanka. The last words of this man, who is today reimagined as a Sinhala nationalist, are recorded as a wish ‘to be born again in India in some noble Brahman family ... and to become a Bhikkhu to preach Dhamma to India’s millions’ (cited in Kemper 2015, 421). Ananda Guruge’s hagiographic nationalist introduction to Dharmapala’s writings includes these words but with the reference to India struck out (Guruge 1991 [1965], xliii).

Dharmapala’s vision of the Sinhala past

Dharmapala, like many other educated Sri Lankans of his time, was fascinated by the Sinhala past. He invokes it in much of his writing. These references to the past are often taken as evidence of his exclusivist Sinhala nationalist mindset. But, as I explore below, Dharmapala’s historical orientation cannot be understood in terms of how history functions in contemporary Sinhala nationalist discourse. In Dharmapala’s time the turn to history was not nationalist in the political sense it is today. One of the dominant themes in Dharmapala’s writing is the contrast between the past glory and the present apathy of the Sinhala people. A rather simple logic informs this turn to the past: if the Sinhalese were once a great nation, what is to prevent them from achieving such greatness in the present? The following passages from an article entitled ‘History of an Ancient Civilisation’ are representative of Dharmapala’s historical vision:

There exists no race on this earth today that has a more glorious, triumphant record of victory than the Sinhalese. Sons of Aryan ancestors, they built their first city and called it Anuradhapura, after the prince Anuradha and the constellation Anura. Fifty-four years before the Battle of Marathon, the Sinhalese had conquered Ceylon; nine years after the conquest of the Kingdom of Candahar by Alexander the Great; and one hundred and eleven years before the destruction of the Carthagian Power; and forty-three years before the consolidation of the Roman Empire, the Religion [sic] of the Buddha was established ...

This bright, beautiful island was made into a Paradise by the Aryan Sinhalese before its destruction was brought about by the barbaric vandals. Its people did not know irreligion. The pagan beliefs of monotheism and diabolic polytheism were unknown to the people. Christianity and polytheism are responsible for the vulgar practices of

killing animals, stealing, prostitution, licentiousness, lying and drunkenness. Read the 'History of Ceylon,' by Sir Emerson Tennent, and the 'Records of the Western World,' by Fa Hian and Hwen Thsang, for they have written what they observed. This ancient, historic, refined people, under the diabolism of vicious paganism, introduced by the British are now declining and dying away. The bureaucratic administrators, ignorant of the first principles of the natural laws of evolution, have cut down primeval forests to plant tea; have introduced opium, ganja, whisky, arrack and other alcoholic poisons; have opened saloons and drinking taverns in every village; have killed all industries and made the people indolent.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], 481–2)

A comparative perspective is immediately apparent in this extract from a booklet published in 1902 for an American audience. Sri Lankan history is narrated in terms of significant events in European history. A desire to claim what Johannes Fabian (1983) has called 'coevalness' to Europe is evident in the list of local historical events that either predate or closely coincide with ones in European antiquity. One reason for this need for comparison is the general tendency of the time to regard Europe as the universal referent of history. The very antiquity of Sinhala culture and especially its demonstrable antiquity in relation to European culture are interpreted as giving it a classical genealogy. Another more immediate reason is the way that colonial historiography represented the Sri Lankan past. As John Rogers (1990) suggests, the work of British historiographers, mostly scholar-administrators, helped to establish an authoritative narrative of the island's past by the mid nineteenth century. This historical narrative based on Pali-language *vamsas* like the *Mahavamsa* posited a three-stage model of history. It traced in Sri Lanka, as in Europe, an ancient classical civilisation that went into a kind of dark middle age because of invasion and disease. The European intervention was the logical next step in this model. Sinhala society was seen as stagnant and decadent; further progress and entry into modernity had to be facilitated by the coloniser. The two most influential historiographies of the period, William Knighton's *History of Ceylon from the Earliest Period to Present Time* (1845) and Emerson Tennent's *Ceylon* (1977 [1860]), cited above by Dharmapala, conformed to this pattern. The local intelligentsia of the period also largely accepted this narrative (Rogers (1990, 102–3).

But Dharmapala interrupts the teleology of this model. He glosses over the decline of Sinhala civilisation in precolonial times and attempts to place the blame squarely on the British administration. In

Dharmapala's scheme it is Christianity and the British who are responsible for a host of social evils that have resulted in the decline of Sinhala civilisation. The image of the Sinhala past is of a proud and conquering race – an image of virile masculinity. As Nandy (1983) has argued, one result of colonial rule was a sense of emasculation among the dominated population. The despondent images of alcoholic Sinhala people in the passage above imply a similar lack of vitality. But by turning to history Dharmapala can retrieve a positive image of the people which can be used as inspiration for the present. The supposed Aryan origins of the Sinhalese – a linguistic cleavage in the categorisation of Dravidian and Aryan languages which gained a racial dynamic in the nineteenth century (Gunawardana 1990) – provides further genealogical support.

The passage also suggests that Dharmapala is questioning the moral authority of British rule; as rulers who have failed to govern responsibly. But this does not amount to a direct challenge to colonial rule. It is more of an appeal to the colonial government to ensure the welfare of the Sinhalese. The Aryan genealogy is used to appeal to a paternalistic dimension of colonial rule, which might see certain races as being worthy of preservation purely because of their antiquity and demonstrable links to a classical heritage. The protection of primeval forests, an ecological concern that appears incongruous with the general thrust of the passage, may also possibly relate to this logic. This discourse of preservation is more explicitly articulated later in the same pamphlet:

The history of evolution can point to no other race today that has withstood the ravages of time and kept its individuality for so long a time as the Sinhalese people. More marvellous it is that there is in the same island the most primitive savage tribe on earth, known under the name of the Veddahs.

For the student of ethnology the Sinhalese stand as the representatives of Aryan civilisation and the Veddah as the product of primitive savagery, and to witness the spectacle of an ancient race slowly dying out under the despotic administration of Anglo-Indian bureaucracy is indeed sad. In the name of Humanity and Progress, we ask the British people to save the Sinhalese race from the jaws of the demon of alcohol and opium let loose by Christian England for the sake of filthy lucre.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], 483)

The Veddahs are considered the island's indigenous inhabitants. Their representation as primitive or savage people, Obeyesekere (n.d.) suggests,

has a colonial genealogy in the way that European writers like Robert Knox categorised them as wild men. Dharmapala appears to be drawing upon this colonial sociology and presents Sri Lanka almost in terms of an ethnographic menagerie. The implication in the passage seems to be that both the Sinhalese and Veddahs are worthy of preservation; the former for their culture and civilisation and the latter for their primitiveness. The coexistence of these two groups also serves to highlight the civilised nature of the Sinhalese and adds further justification to the call for their protection.

But the discourse of preservation in Dharmapala also coexists with one that desires to see 'progress'. This is a seemingly contradictory impulse but it is premised on an understanding that progress will not endanger the essential and unchanging characteristics of Sinhala identity – in effect a belief that the 'authenticity' of the Sinhala people will not suffer. This is partly because Dharmapala believed that industrial/material aspects of life were not something alien to Sinhala culture. For instance, he speaks of how '[i]n the eleventh century after Christ the Sinhalese had a regular navy, a fleet of sailing vessels which was used for fighting purposes, and all the country round about the coast seemed "like one great workshop constantly busied with the constant building of ships"' (Dharmapala 1907, 287). Dharmapala also associated Buddhism, something seen as uniquely Eastern or Sri Lankan, with a discourse of science and progress (McMahan 2004).

Dharmapala could express admiration for industrial Europe but at the same time separate it from European culture, which he equated with Christianity – a religion he saw as non-modern and regressive. Dharmapala is able to make this critique because there were a number of discourses that supported it at the time. A strong fin-de-siècle rationalist–scientific discourse was challenging the place of Christianity in the public sphere, but at the same time Buddhism was being constructed as rational and scientific thanks to the work of Orientalist scholars within the larger discourse of the Oriental Renaissance (Lopez 1995, 6–10; McMahan 2004). The work of Theosophists also gave Buddhism and other Eastern religions an avant-garde position in relation to Christianity, though Theosophy's emphasis was more mystical than scientific (Owen 2004, 6–8). The following passage is representative of Dharmapala's positive view of industry and science:

Europe is progressive. Her religion is kept in the background for one day in the week, and for six days her peoples are following the dictates of modern science ...

The Sinhalese, Bengalese, Madrasees, Bombayites, Panjabees, Burmese, Chinese and Koreans that go to Europe and America to study in the colleges [sic] law and medicine return after several years thoroughly Europeanised. The Japanese are the only practical people who have sent their sons to learn the technical sciences. They are reaping the fruits of practical wisdom.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], 717–18)

There is admiration for Europe because of its material/scientific advancement. The separation of religion from the public sphere is seen as positive in Europe. This is only because Dharmapala views Europe as Christian and Christianity as a non-modern: ‘The mythical stories of the Jewish Bible, have no scientific foundations. They are unfit for the advanced thinkers of the 20th century’ (Guruge 1991 [1965], 717). But if the religion is Buddhism it need not be hidden away. The Japanese are held up as a positive model because they have been able to achieve this fusion of Buddhism and indigenous culture with material progress. Although Dharmapala became disillusioned with Japanese society and religiosity later in life, the ideal of a modern, technologically advanced society that remains true to its Buddhist spiritual values seems to be something Dharmapala held on to as an aspiration. Overall, Dharmapala’s vision of Sinhaleanness appears to have been a reformist one – divided between pride in a glorious Sinhala past and embarrassment with present impoverishment. Authenticity signals a return to lost grandeur.

Buddhism and Sinhala identity

Dharmapala’s identification of Buddhism as an inextricable part of Sinhala identity is another important aspect of his imaginary. Buddhism in Dharmapala is an index of authenticity – in short, to be truly Sinhala one also needs to be Buddhist. Historically, this represents a narrowing of the definition of Sinhala identity, which emerged with the Buddhist revivalist movement in the mid nineteenth century. It anticipates the politicised Sinhala Buddhist discourse of authenticity that emerged in the mid twentieth century but is also distinct. Although Sinhala Buddhism denotes a certain kind of cultural and moral authenticity for Dharmapala, it does not translate into the kind of Sinhala Buddhist majoritarianism that became visible in the twentieth century. Also, as Roberts (2000, 114) observes, many of Dharmapala’s contemporaries were Sinhala Christians who promoted Sinhala identity without the

Buddhist dimension. Even within Dharmapala's writing, as I will discuss later, there is ambiguity. Broadly inclusive terms like 'Ceylonese' exist alongside more exclusive understandings of the nation as Sinhala or Sinhala Buddhist. Given this context, the sharpest vision of a Sinhala Buddhist nation is visible when Dharmapala writes about the past rather than about his present.

The conflation of Sinhala identity with Buddhism emerges through the Sinhala historical grand narrative that began to take shape in the nineteenth century. The *Mahavamsa*, the main Pali-language chronicle used by European scholars and later adopted by local scholars and historians as a primary precolonial historical source, was written by monks and has a distinct Buddhist bias. As Kemper (1990, 188–90) suggests, it is a didactic work that narrates a mytho-historical account of the island's past ordered by a vision of an ideal moral and political order between the king, the *sangha* and the people. A good king in this vision is one who governs according to Buddhist principles and is able to unify the island. It also conflates the relationship between king and people. Any nationalism based on the *Mahavamsa*, therefore, Jonathan Spencer (1990, 6) argues, will have an inherent Buddhist bias.

As a number of scholars have suggested, the reification of the *Mahavamsa* as a historiographic text and the use of modern conceptual categories like nation and ethnicity in reading it have suppressed the heterogeneity of precolonial identity discourse on the island (Gunawardana 1990; Rogers 1990). Dharmapala was heavily influenced by the *Mahavamsa* narrative. In an article entitled 'Buddhism, Past and Present', which he contributed to a coffee-table book called *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon* (1907), the relationship between Buddhism, the nation and Sinhala identity is clearly articulated:

In the year 237 B.C. the Tamil invader Elala [Elara], usurped the Sinhalese throne ... The Tamils fiercely antagonistic to Buddhism, committed acts of vandalism in the sacred city of Anuradhapura, and – for a time – there was none to deter them. At this crisis there arose a wonderful prince, whose father was then reigning in Southern Ceylon ... Particulars of [his] birth are given in the Mahavansa [sic], chap. 22. This young prince Gamini Abhaya [Dutugemunu], when he had reached maturity made war upon the usurper, Elala. After a series of pitched battles, the Sinhalese prince defeated Elala in single combat and slew him on the battlefield. Then began the building of magnificent temples (monuments), by the conqueror, who, reducing [sic] Lanka (Ceylon) under one rule,

became king. From the world-renowned ruins of these dagobas at Anuradhapura an idea of their original splendour may be obtained. The war that Gamini Abhaya waged with Elara was of a religious character, and he made it known by solemn proclamation that ‘this enterprise of mine is not for the purpose of acquiring the pomp and advantages of royalty’ ... Impelled by the supreme force of the truth of the Dhamma ... the youthful race of Ceylon, in the vigour of renewed vitality. Engaged under the new king, in making themselves serviceable to their country and religion ... Free from foreign influences, untainted by alien customs, with the word of the Buddha as their guiding light, the Sinhalese people lived a joyously cheerful life in those bygone times.

(Dharmapala 1907, 285–6)

The story of Dutugemunu that Dharmapala narrates here has become part of popular Sinhala lore and is reproduced frequently in nationalist discourse (de Silva 1987, 26–7). It is understood as the story of an exemplary figure who saved the religion and nation from foreign domination. Gananath Obeyesekere (1991) asserts that it was Dharmapala who ‘resurrected the myth of Dutugemunu’ (Obeyesekere 1991, 238). It is, however, very likely the story was already popular in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka – among both the anglophone community and the wider population. Even Emerson Tennent’s *Ceylon* (1977 [1860]) highlights the Dutugemunu–Elara confrontation as a chivalric incident in Sinhala history. Obeyesekere’s claim reflects the general scholarly trend of ascribing originary status to Dharmapala in Sinhala nationalist thinking.

What is important in Dharmapala’s account are the ways it is structured by modern notions of race and nation. Dharmapala identifies Dutugemunu as Sinhala and Elara, the invading South Indian king, as Tamil. But, as Gunawardana (1990 [1979]), suggests the picture is not so clear cut. Gunawardana argues that Dutugemunu waged war on multiple fronts rather than against a singular enemy represented by Elara. He also suggests that Elara’s forces were not homogeneously Tamil and that Sinhala mercenaries may have fought on his side. Precolonial identities, as a number of scholars have suggested (Gunawardana 1990; Rogers 1990; 1994; Obeyesekere 1995), had relatively fluid boundaries. It is also important to note that Dharmapala’s use of the term ‘Tamil’ cannot be equated with the use of the term today. Sri Lankan Tamils were not perceived as a threat in the early twentieth century. Therefore, the use of ‘Tamil’ here in a generic sense refers to people of South Indian origin who historically threatened Sinhala kingdoms, such as the Cholas. The ending

of the passage also reflects a general romantic orientation Dharmapala had towards the Sinhala past as one of prosperity and contentment – a narrative shared by many educated Sri Lankans of the early twentieth century, including Bandaranaike.

A footnote to this discussion of Dharmapala's view of the relationship between Buddhism and Sinhala identity would be to suggest that Buddhism also served to give Sinhala culture global importance. In promoting Buddhism abroad Dharmapala often presented the religion as something that had contemporary relevance and global significance. The belief that Buddhism is non-theistic and scientific and therefore modern in relation to religions like Christianity and Islam is a perennial theme in his writing. From one of his earliest international speeches at the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, 'The World's Debt to Buddha' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 3–22), to articles he wrote in the late 1920s, the idea that Buddhism has a vital role to play in the modern world is a continuous theme.

Although this 'modernist' view of Buddhism was part of Dharmapala's vision of Buddhism as a universalist discourse, at times it also folded into a more culturally specific narrative. For instance, Dharmapala weaves the absence of Buddhism in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India into an argument about Sinhala exceptionalism. He argues that 'India, the birthplace of Buddhism, has no living witness of its forgotten greatness', but in contrast 'the glorious inheritance of Aryan ancestors, uncontaminated by Semitic and savage ideas, though lost to India, has been preserved by the Aryan Sinhalese in the luxuriant isle of Ceylon' (Dharmapala 1907, 284). He further suggests that 'In its primitive purity ... it is generally acknowledged that this religion is only to be found in the Southern Church of Buddhism, which is identified with Ceylon' (Dharmapala 1907, 287). The term 'Southern Church' with its direct Christian connotation suggests that Dharmapala's identification of Sri Lankan Buddhism as a pure form derives from Orientalist scholarship. However, the view of Sri Lanka Buddhism as 'pure' also had precolonial antecedents (Blackburn 2010). Scholars like T. W. Rhys-Davids, following the pioneering work of Eugene Burnouf, drew distinctions between a more austere 'Southern' Buddhism and a ritualistic Mahayana Buddhism, based on the Protestant–Catholic divide in Christianity (Snodgrass 2007). But, as Charles Hallisey (1995) has suggested, nineteenth-century Western scholarly interpretations of Buddhism were not entirely arbitrary. The idea that Buddhism would decline in India and that Sri Lanka would be the repository of Buddhism is deeply encoded in the *Mahavamsa* narrative (de Silva 1981, 4). Thus,

local traditions and Orientalist discourses combine in Dharmapala to produce a narrative where an untainted form of Buddhism is associated with the Sinhala nation. This in turn places the nation on the global map given the emergent international recognition of Buddhism in the early twentieth century. In essence, what one sees in Dharmapala is a comparative urge that sought to reinterpret his home culture in worldly terms – a dynamic visible in Bandaranaike as well, where the imagination looks simultaneously inwards and outwards, shuttling between home and the world.

Dharmapala and others

Dharmapala did not have a singular Other, which distinguishes him from contemporary Sinhala nationalist thinking, where Tamils and more recently Muslims are seen as distinct political enemies. Although Sinhala racial identity and Buddhism were constants in his thinking, other ethnic and religious communities figure in different guises – at times condescendingly seen as hapless victims of colonialism, at others more insidiously as corrupting and threatening influences. Some insight into Dharmapala's view of contemporaneous society may be gained from a piece from 1922, entitled 'A Message to the Young Men of Ceylon'. The term 'Ceylon' in the early twentieth century had resonances of a 'Ceylonese' identity – a broadly inclusive term that conflated different ethno-religious communities but was circumscribed by class, wealth and anglophone privilege (Roberts 2000). Dharmapala's use of the term appears to oscillate between this more inclusive sense and a more particularistic Sinhala-centric ideology. He begins the piece by invoking the legend of Dutugemunu:

I have been asked to deliver a message to you, and now that a crisis in the history of our nation has arrived, it is proper that we the heirs of our beloved Lanka, should gird our loins, and put our shoulders to the wheel, and arrest the decay that is visible on all sides ... We have to ransack the literature of the science of patriotism to learn to act as patriots should for the glorious religion, at whose source our fore-fathers drank deep ... to fight against foes since the time of our heroic and patriot king, the righteous Dutthagamani [Dutugemunu], who with the help of his mother and his Sangha [the priests], reinvigorated and revitalised the nation, 161 years before the birth of Jesus Christ whose followers, from the West

came to our blessed land, 1505 years after the Nativity, and laid waste our fertile lands.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], 501)

The call for national revival, heavy in biblical rhetoric, is informed by a particularistic Sinhala and Buddhist historical vision. Given the historical material available to Dharmapala, this is not surprising. Even Sinhala Christian scholars like James de Alwis, in the early nineteenth century, expressed quasi-nationalist sentiments that were inspired by the same Sinhala and Buddhist historical grand narrative (Dharmadasa 1992). The grand narrative of the Sinhala past was simply a means of claiming cultural pride. There is no evidence to suggest that de Alwis viewed other non-Sinhala communities with antipathy (Dharmadasa 1992, 77). In Dharmapala, however, historical consciousness shapes the view of the present more significantly. Though the article begins by invoking a Sinhala and Buddhist imaginary, Dharmapala also writes, 'Christians and Buddhists should unite and work for the elevation of the Sinhalese people. Religion should in no way hinder our patriotic activities, and it had not prevented Sun Yat Sen, the son of a Chinese Christian, from working for the elevation of the Chinese people' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 510).

But Dharmapala cannot acknowledge Sinhala Christians unconditionally. Contrasted with the historical narrative of a homogeneous Sinhala and Buddhist identity, they are a reminder of a history of colonial miscegenation. He goes on to state, 'A small portion of the Sinhalese nation, under the compulsion of the invading freebooters and pirates in the 16th century of the Christian era adopted the religion of the Roman Pope' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 502). Sinhala Christians are therefore positioned as a kind of fallen minority within the larger Sinhala Buddhist ethos. Other ethno-religious groups do not figure at all here but his use of the term 'nation' is not coterminous with 'nation state' in the contemporary imagination. The sense that Sinhala identity is beleaguered is clearly visible, though the sources of this beleaguerment are indistinct. For instance, Dharmapala repeatedly warns that Sinhala identity is threatened with dissolution: 'Think that you are now surrounded by a host of enemies who encompasseth [sic] your destruction, who is trying to make you a slave in your own land by giving you to drink the poison of alcohol' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 510)

The most immediate threat here is identified as the 'alien white [man] who for the sake of filthy lucre gives us alcohol' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 511), but the perception of threat also spills over into a narrative

of economic exploitation in which other communities are seen as having an unfair share of national resources and employment opportunities. For instance, looking at revenue from the Railways Department, Dharmapala suggests that locally generated wealth is being expatriated and that ‘Tamils, Cochins [traders of Indian origin], Hambankarayas [a disparaging term for Moors] are employed in large numbers to the *prejudice of the people of the Island* – sons of the soil, who contribute the largest share’ (Guruge 1991 [1965], 515, emphasis original). It is important to historically contextualise Dharmapala’s use of the term ‘Tamil’. The reference here is to Indian Tamil labour – migrant workers brought to the country by the colonial administration. In 1921, fearing a labour shortage in the plantations, the colonial government passed legislation favouring immigrant labour and facilitating the movement of labour between different sectors of the economy (Peebles 2001, 175). Dharmapala’s attitude here follows that of the Sinhala political elite, who tended to lump together all people of Indian origin as ‘Non-Ceylonese’ (Peebles 2001, 175). This also anticipates the anti-Indian sentiment in the labour movement in the late 1920s with the impact of the Great Depression. As Kumari Jayawardena (2003, 27) notes, the labour movement was multi-ethnic from the early to mid 1920s and during this phase pioneering Sinhala labour leaders like A. E. Goonesinghe closely collaborated with figures like Natesa Iyer, a South Indian journalist who became a labour activist. However, by the end of the 1920s even people like Goonesinghe were complicit in promoting anti-Indian-Tamil sentiments – particularly in the pages of *Weeraya* (Hero), a newspaper published by the labour movement (Anandalingam and Abraham 1986). What Dharmapala’s comments reveal is that the terms of inclusion and exclusion varied over time and were often informed by immediate economic circumstances.

One could suggest that the greatest Other for Sinhala discourse in the 1920s was the ‘Hambankarayas’ or the Moor community – particularly those identified as Coast Moors as opposed to Ceylon Moors and Malays, communities that had a longer history in Sri Lanka (Roberts 1990). A popular negative stereotype of the Moor community in the early twentieth century was the cunning Moor trader who exploited innocent Sinhala villagers (Moore 1992; Jayawardena 2003). The specific target here were Coast Moors (Jayawardena 2003, 13). Some segments of this community had significant control of the island’s internal and external trade and were in direct competition with an emergent Sinhala merchant class. Dharmapala’s family had a strong trading-merchant basis and his views of Moors were potentially shaped by family concerns. On 31 May 1915 rioting broke out when Sinhala mobs, particularly

Sinhala railway workers, targeted Moor traders in Colombo, hundreds died and martial law was declared by the colonial government (de Silva 1981, 382). The 1915 riots led to several prominent Sinhala public figures being incarcerated; two of Dharmapala's brothers, Edmund and Dr C. A. Hewavitharana, were among them (de Silva 1981, 383). Dharmapala's response to the riots, which drew on anti-Semitic rhetoric, is indicative of the antipathy towards Moors:

The Muhammedans [Moors], an alien people, who in the early part of the 19th century were common traders, by Shylockian methods became prosperous like the Jews. The Sinhalese, sons of the soil, whose ancestors for 2538 years had shed rivers of blood to keep the country free from alien invaders, who had constructed gigantic tanks to irrigate millions of acres ... to-day [sic] they are in the eyes of the British only vagabonds ... The alien South Indian Muhammedan comes to Ceylon, sees the neglected illiterate villager, without any experience in trade, without any knowledge of any kind of technical industry and isolated from the whole of Asia on account of his language, religion and race, and the result is that the Muhammedan thrives and the son of the soil goes to the wall.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], 540)

This passage is an extract from a letter Dharmapala wrote to the Secretary of State for Colonies in the immediate aftermath of the riots. The anti-Semitism could potentially be a strategy of gaining British sympathy by invoking a longstanding European stereotype of the 'scheming Jewish merchant' (Erens 1984, 30, 70). Dharmapala opens the letter with a reference to his family background which provides insight into the economic basis of the Sinhala-Moor conflict: 'The writer of this letter is a Buddhist Missionary ... He is a native of Ceylon belonging to the [sic] leading Buddhist family. His father was honoured by the Ceylon Government for the many philanthropic acts done for the Buddhists of Ceylon, and he was one of the leading Native merchants of Ceylon' (Guruge 1991 [1965], 538). By claiming to speak on behalf of the interests of the 'neglected illiterate villager' he makes a greater claim to speak on behalf of the Sinhala nation. There is also no principled objection against capitalism, which might have been expected from a spiritual figure like Dharmapala. There seem to be echoes of a kind of Protestant ethic in Dharmapala's thinking – where productive economic activity and Buddhist religiosity are reconciled. This is borne out in the restless energy that characterised Dharmapala's life and his many initiatives to modernise Sri Lankan life

in different spheres. The emphasis is on critiquing foreign or ‘alien’ economic interests while promoting an emergent Sinhala capitalist class.

The economic imperatives informing Dharmapala’s view of the Moor community are suggestive of how identity politics in early twentieth-century Sri Lanka were informed by immediate economic and social conditions. Rather than hoary notions of Sinhala–Tamil conflict, what is visible is a shifting and contingent discourse premised not against a singular Other but multiple Others whose visibility as potential threats was heightened by competition for resources within the colonial economy (Rogers 1997).

Framing Dharmapala: Dharmapala as national hero

There are a number of hagiographic accounts of Dharmapala’s life in English and Sinhala. Two texts stand out among these. One is *Return to Righteousness*, published in 1965 and edited by Ananda Guruge, a civil servant and diplomat who also researched and published on Buddhism. The other is the Sinhala text *Anagarika Dharmapala* written by David Karunaratne (1964). These two texts were central to introducing Dharmapala to English and Sinhala audiences in independent Sri Lanka (Jayadeva Uyangoda, personal communication, 15 August 2017). They both take a similar hagiographic approach to Dharmapala’s life and career. *Return to Righteousness* is the more comprehensive of the two and gathers a large corpus of Dharmapala’s writing from scattered sources. It was a text that had institutional backing and was published by the Government of Sri Lanka to mark Dharmapala’s birth centenary. Its accessibility to foreign scholars as an English-language publication contributed to the scholarly equations of Dharmapala with the revival of Buddhism and Sinhala nationalism.

The historical context of this text’s production and the institutional support given to its publication are important indicators of the conditions under which Dharmapala’s legacy became institutionalised and visibly appropriated by nationalist discourse. The decade beginning in 1956 saw significant shifts in the political culture of the country. The year 1956 marked the institutionalisation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism when S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike was elected as prime minister on a wave of popular Sinhala and Buddhist support (Manor 1989). The sense of beleaguerment that features prominently in post-independence Sinhala nationalist discourse was especially visible in this period. Though formal independence had been gained in 1948, influential Sinhala and Buddhist

pressure groups felt that, culturally and institutionally, little had changed from colonial times.

The Official Language Act of 1956, one of the first legislative acts by Bandaranaike's government, made Sinhala the sole official language of the country. This move was considered an important step in decolonisation by groups sometimes referred to as the 'intermediary elite' (de Silva 1981, 517; Roberts 2000) owing to their social status of coming from rural middle-class backgrounds positioned between the peasantry and the anglophone elite. The disastrous consequences of this legislation are well known and still felt in the country (DeVotta 2004). Guruge's compilation of Dharmapala's writing emerged in this charged nationalist context and is resonant of the institutionalisation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in these years. The text was published by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and Information and the then Prime Minister, Dudley Senanayake, provided a preface.

A related discourse marking this period concerned a sense of Buddhist millennialism coinciding with the year 2500 in the Buddhist calendar, which fell in 1956. In anticipation of this event a commission, consisting of influential Buddhist monks and lay public figures, was appointed to enquire into the status of Buddhism in the country. The report of this commission was published in 1956. Expressing a beleaguered worldview, the report traced a narrative of Buddhist decline since Portuguese colonisation in the sixteenth century (Bond 1988, 81; Tambiah 1992, 33). The English version of the report was published with the provocative title *The Betrayal of Buddhism*. The report argued for the reinstatement of Buddhism to its precolonial position of pre-eminence and recommended legislative, financial and institutional reforms. This heightened sense of cultural nationalism is reflected in the preface and introduction to *Return to Righteousness* and in Karunaratne's book. They are in effect textual and ideological frames that seek to position Dharmapala as nationalist hero and father figure.

The preface by Senanayake is indicative of how Sinhala identity and the Buddhist religion are often conflated in Sinhala nationalist discourse, effectively suppressing or marginalising the multicultural and multi-religious nature of independent Ceylon – despite the fact that in the 1947 Constitution, which was still in effect in 1965, the state was identified as secular. Senanayake begins the short preface by briefly sketching Dharmapala's contribution to the nation: 'The Anagarika's services to his country were many. But the two outstanding services he rendered were to resuscitate Buddhism and Sinhala culture in Ceylon at a time when over 300 years of foreign rule had sapped their vitality. His

other outstanding contribution was an unswerving loyalty to the nationalist movement and the nationalist cause' (Guruge 1991 [1965], v). If in these comments Sinhala identity and Buddhism are held separate, at least at the level of rhetoric, from 'the nationalist movement and the nationalist cause', they become clearly conflated in the next few lines. Senanayake sketches how Buddhism suffered during colonial occupation and says this had 'debilitating effects on the national life and national culture because of the close and inextricable link between Buddhism and Sinhalese culture' (Guruge 1991 [1965], v). Senanayake's position was not unique among English-educated Sinhala politicians of the time: at every opportunity they sought to position themselves as protectors of Buddhism and Sinhala culture, intensely self-conscious of how they were criticised as anglophile by Sinhala nationalist pressure groups. As words from the highest political authority in the country, Senanayake's preface to Dharmapala's writing carried significant institutional and political weight.

Ananda Guruge's introduction seeks to articulate Dharmapala's heroic stature more explicitly. The title *Return to Righteousness*, which was presumably Guruge's choice, is resonant of the discursive framework informing the compilation of this text. 'Return to righteousness' suggests a moral and ethical imperative associated with a way of life from which the nation is seen to have deviated. It echoes Dharmapala's reformist impulse but can also be seen as referring to the historical context of the text's production – a time when a return to things considered indigenous was being increasingly articulated in public and political discourse. The introduction opens with a sub-section entitled 'The Commemoration of a National Hero', where Dharmapala is placed in a pantheon of heroic historic figures:

Ceylon, with her twenty-five centuries of recorded history, is endowed with a generous quota of national heroes who are gratefully remembered by the people for the wars they fought for national independence, the movements they sponsored for the welfare of the masses, the books they wrote, the monuments they erected and the contributions they made to the individuality and richness of the national culture. The heroes of ancient times whose fame lives in legends and songs, folk-tales and chronicles, have acquired for themselves in the minds of the people an image which has remained unaltered for centuries. So indelible is the impression thus created in their minds that even a critical student of history – not to speak of a cynic or sceptic – runs

the risk of courting popular disapproval if anything which deviates, though very slightly, from the popular image were to be said or written. This is not an attitude of mere apotheosis. To a Sinhala [person], Dutugemunu, Parakaramabahu, Madduma Banda, Keppetipola & c. are not deities or super-men, to be venerated or appeased on account of any super-natural power or ability they are believed to possess. These men are honoured and remembered for the greatness they displayed through piety, patriotism or bravery and for the sacrifices they made for their honour or their motherland.

(Guruge 1991 [1965], xvii)

The warning about courting popular displeasure anticipates the ideological work Guruge's introduction does. It draws Dharmapala into a mytho-historical genealogy of national heroes and interprets his life and work in terms of a laudatory narrative of service to the nation. The self-imposed task of the introduction is to place Dharmapala within a perceived popular tradition of celebrating national heroes. There is a conscious distancing from any critical evaluation or historicisation of Dharmapala. Guruge too reproduces the predictable narrative of Sinhala Buddhist decline under colonialism against which Dharmapala's achievements are positioned. He makes references to Dharmapala's international missionary work and especially to his role as a Buddhist representative at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 – to highlight Dharmapala's global fame.

The introduction also highlights Dharmapala's anti-colonialism, projecting him as a heroic anti-colonial figure. In doing so, Guruge concedes that Dharmapala's views on colonial governance were ambiguous. Thus Guruge writes, 'It was the Anagarika's aim that Ceylon should be independent' (Guruge 1991 [1965], lxxii) but at the same time observes, 'The Anagarika's attitude to the British had changed from time to time' (lxxii). Such statements indicate the difficulty of placing Dharmapala within a neat anti-colonial nationalist framework given the complexities of his socio-historical context. Though the thematic thrust of the introduction requires the depiction of Dharmapala as an outright anti-colonial figure, Guruge struggles to do so because Dharmapala's own writing is not conducive to such a one-dimensional reading.

The introduction also focuses on what is termed Dharmapala's 'policy on aliens' (Guruge 1991 [1965], lxxix). Guruge suggests that Dharmapala anticipated the 'Indo-Ceylon problem', referring to the

agreement between the Ceylonese and Indian governments to ‘repatriate’ about half a million of the Indian Tamil community in 1964. However, the interest in constitutional issues regarding minorities which Guruge attributes to Dharmapala is not visible in his writing or thinking. Dharmapala seems to have been oblivious of constitutional affairs as a whole.

The citizen–alien dichotomy is strongly articulated in Guruge’s introduction and can be seen as emerging from the cultural-nationalist fervour of the times. Guruge even reproduces a cartoon published by Dharmapala in the *Sinhala Bauddhaya* which shows a hapless Sinhala man being blindfolded and robbed by a host of ‘aliens’ (Guruge 1991 [1965], lxxx). However, despite the fact that the first instance of post-independence ethnic rioting between the Sinhala community and the Ceylon Tamil community had occurred in 1958 following the implementation of the 1956 Language Act, Guruge’s introduction does not conflate Ceylon Tamil and Indian Tamil identities – an important point demonstrating that nationalist discourse rarely remains stable. It is only much later in the 1980s that Sinhala nationalist discourse begins to regard Tamils as a single homogeneous block, but even today Sinhala nationalists make distinctions between Jaffna Tamils, Colombo Tamils and Indian Tamils when such distinctions are strategically useful. Similarly, Tamil politicians incorporate Indian Tamils when it is useful but exclude them at other times. As a category of practice, nationalism generates a seemingly homogeneous imagined community but, as a category of analysis, we can see this imagined community as something that is never what it claims to be.

Conclusion

The preface and introduction of *Return to Righteousness* reflect a process whereby an institutional discourse appropriates the legacy of a public figure. The title of national hero was not associated with Dharmapala in his own time; it was conferred retrospectively. Though both these framing narratives highlight themes that Dharmapala himself promoted and do not radically reconstitute or reinterpret him, the institutional context of the publication of *Return to Righteousness* and the specific socio-historical moment of its production point towards the way that Dharmapala’s legacy became reified in post-independence nationalist discourse. The complex and contradictory set of discourses that informed Dharmapala’s nationalist imaginary are simplified as he is re-presented

as a national hero. Dharmapala in his own writing reductively interprets the precolonial history of the island and projects concerns of his own time into the past. Ironically, a similarly reductive move is visible in the ways his biographers, and Sinhala nationalist discourse in general, have appropriated his legacy.

The themes that emerge in Dharmapala's writing appear in differing but analogous forms in [Chapters 4 and 5](#). The most dominant of these is the sense of beleaguerment that coordinates much of Dharmapala's proto-nationalist thought. The desire to locate markers of indigeneity which authenticate the self and nation also remains an abiding concern. The repetitive articulation of this discourse of authenticity points towards a crisis in defining the authentic Sinhala self. Paradoxically, the very attempt to locate this essence becomes the moment when its existence appears tenuous, fleeting and only partially realised. The framing of Dharmapala's writing by Guruge provides an apt transition to the [next chapter](#). S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike rose to power with the support of the groups that produced *Return to Righteousness*. In his writing we can see how Sinhala nationalism's cultural imaginary became an institutionalised political discourse. It is a moment when a politician aspiring to be a popular leader fashions his identity to fit a perceived notion of authenticity but in that very move raises questions about what constitutes the authentic Sinhala self.

4

S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike: the paradox of authenticity

Introduction

The first thing I must do is to apologise to you for speaking to you in English. Owing to my long absence from my country, I am not sufficiently fluent in Sinhalese to be able to address you in Sinhalese at length. That is a fault that can be easily remedied. What is more important is that my heart should be sound. And I can assure you that my heart is Sinhalese to the core.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 83)

These words were uttered in 1925 by Solomon West Ridgeway Dias Bandaranaike, who in 1956 became independent Ceylon's fourth prime minister, riding a popular wave of Sinhala nationalist support to power. The extract above is from a speech he made just after his return to Sri Lanka, having completed undergraduate studies at Oxford. Young Bandaranaike was groomed for a career in the colonial administration by his father, Sir Solomon Dias Bandaranaike, who was the *maha mudaliyar*, head of the colony's 'native administration' (Manor 1989, 14). Bandaranaike was addressing a crowd gathered near his ancestral home at Horogalla, in the Gampaha district, about 40 kilometres from Colombo. Having been schooled by a British tutor and later at the exclusive St Thomas' College, Bandaranaike knew little or no Sinhala at the time of his return from Oxford. What he says here therefore can be seen in part as political posturing by a callow and politically immature youth eager to appear progressive and nationalist. However, the desire to project an authentic image speaks to an abiding concern in Bandaranaike's political life – the claim to indigeneity as a decolonising leader.

This moment also serves as a metaphor for a larger dynamic in Bandaranaike's life, and indeed for a structural feature of twentieth-century politics in Sri Lanka. As I will explore here, Bandaranaike's turn to indigeneity and the processes through which he sought to construct a sense of the authentic are indicative of the desire to close a gap between the nationalist elite and upper classes of Sinhala society and the Sinhala majority. A romanticised notion of authenticity deriving from nineteenth-century colonial sociology, which drew upon grandiose historical visions of the country and a rural paddy-cultivation-based ethos as the basis of Sinhala society, was used by the nationalist elite to claim custodianship over culture and identity and to both 'teach' people true values and simultaneously gain legitimacy as the true representatives of the people (Rogers 1990, 87–106). Bandaranaike was, perhaps, the most keenly conscious among his political compatriots of the need to project an aura of authenticity; it is therefore in his writings, especially those from his politically formative years from the mid 1920s to the mid 1930s, that this dynamic of authenticating one's political and private self is most apparent. Bandaranaike's populist approach can be seen as an example of elite politicians adjusting to growing political awareness and participation among a wider cross-section of society.

Although the imprint of need for a locally grounded authenticity is writ large in Bandaranaike's writing, there is also a sense in which the nation's authenticity is always in conversation with transnational discourses such as liberalism and socialism. It is never simply a case of seeking to be 'ancient' or authentic; rather, one has to be authentic and modern at the same time. The result is not 'cosmopolitan' in the sense that Cheah and Robbins (1998) define it as an imaginary that can transcend particularisms. Bandaranaike's political imagination rarely rises above the frames of reference nationalism imposes on it. More problematically, it is rarely able to even transcend divisions within the nation.

The inward- and outward-looking dynamic in Bandaranaike is similar to Dharmapala's. Although Bandaranaike was concerned primarily with political power, and Dharmapala with moral reform, there are structural and procedural commonalities in how they saw the Sinhala past and Buddhism – commonalities that point to the larger historical discourses within which they operated. Their careers overlapped briefly but there is no evidence they had any direct contact. Like Dharmapala, Bandaranaike is remembered in Sinhala nationalist discourse as a hero of decolonisation and as a patriot. As we shall see, his relationship to a sense of authenticity was fraught with tensions and contradictions – more visibly than in Dharmapala because of his public position as a politician.

I explore the dynamic of being at once modern and ancient, or looking outwards and inwards, in four 'locations' in which Bandaranaike sought to fashion a sense of political and self-identity: memoirs of his Oxford days, his brief flirtation with Gandhian thought, his conversion to Buddhism and his controversial decision to back Sinhala as the sole official language of the country. In all four locations the idea of authenticity is not static or one-dimensional. Instead, it is inflected by a number of personal, cultural and political concerns. In his Oxford memoirs he is a heroic figure conquering a metropolitan bastion of learning in preparation for his role as nationalist leader. In his Gandhian writings he is a politician envisioning a return to an organic way of life. In his writings on Buddhism he is a rational sceptic who finds a spiritual home that allows him to straddle a middle ground between tradition and modernity. In promoting Sinhala as the official language he is a canny politician mobilising a popular slogan with little affective attachment to the underlying issue. These four locations of authenticity, though not atypical, are by no means exhaustive of the multiple ways in which Sinhala discourses of authenticity functioned at large. The Sinhala language – which Bandaranaike mobilised politically but did not critically reflect on, because he took it for granted as a mark of identity – was an arena of fierce contestation. There were also notions of authenticity outside the purview of elite discourse, such as in Sinhala theatre and print culture, and in the development of notions of authentic dress (Wickramasinghe 2006, 74–94). These multiple refractions of the discourse of authenticity point to its contingent and constructed nature but at the same time highlight the extent to which the notion was embedded in nationalist thought.

Bandaranaike's life and political career

Bandaranaike was born to wealth and privilege in colonial Ceylon on 8 January 1899. His name carries traces of his colonial lineage, two of his names deriving from his godfather and the then Governor of Ceylon Sir Joseph West Ridgeway (Manor 1989, 14). Bandaranaike's father Sir Solomon was also fond of emulating British customs and styled himself after the image of a British country squire (Manor 1989). An Anglican family with a long history of colonial service, the Dias Bandaranaiques enjoyed a lifestyle far removed from the poverty of the vast majority of Sri Lankans at the time. As Yasmine Gooneratne notes in *Relative Merits* (1986), a memoir of the Bandaranaike family, most wealthy members of the 'clan' travelled extensively in Europe and emulated the lifestyles

of minor British aristocracy and gentry. There is a contrast here with the Nehru family in India, which maintained a public–private dichotomy between an anglicised exterior and a more ‘traditional’ domestic life (Holden 2008, 88).

Following this tradition, young Bandaranaike was educated by a British tutor before going to St Thomas’ College in Colombo, a premier Anglican school, which emulated the British public school tradition. Following his secondary education, Bandaranaike entered Christ Church, Oxford to read classics and obtained a high second, which was a significant achievement for an Asian student at the time (Manor 1989, 36–55). Bandaranaike also became the junior treasurer of the Oxford Union and made a name for himself as a commanding orator. His success at Oxford allowed him to distance himself from the privileges of his birth and claim a sense of achievement based on merit. When he returned to Ceylon, Bandaranaike did not enter the colonial civil service, as envisioned by his father, but entered politics. From a very early stage in his political career, Bandaranaike sought to project himself as an anti-colonial political figure heralding a transition from a collaborationist colonial-elite political system to an independent, representative system of governance. He was one of the first political figures in Sri Lanka to adopt native dress and he later learnt Sinhala and began using the language to address public gatherings. He converted to Buddhism in the 1930s. All three of these marks of authenticity, however, remained somewhat abstract and academic. They may have made Bandaranaike appear more radical and authentic than many other national politicians, but he remained very much part of the political class, which had little connection with the people it claimed to represent.

In the only extended political biography of Bandaranaike, James Manor (1989) reads this turn to authenticity as significantly influenced by an oedipal conflict with Bandaranaike’s anglophile father. Manor’s account of Bandaranaike, though providing comprehensive coverage of his life and the political context he operated in, needs to be supplemented. Written in the tradition of political biography, which positions prominent, powerful and often elite individuals as focal points in the political dynamics of a society, Manor’s study reveals less of the discursive forces that shaped Bandaranaike. The problem of elite leaders, especially in decolonising contexts, being portrayed as dominant agents of change is amplified because of their visibility and accessibility in the available archival material. By shifting the focus from the individual per se to larger discourses within and against which Bandaranaike fashioned his self-identity it is possible to see him as someone who functioned

within a framework of nationalist authenticity over which he had little control. The locations within and through which he sought to authenticate himself delineate what he identified as authenticity. But his notions of authenticity did not always resonate with other elite and non-elite groups on the island.

Bandaranaike entered active politics through the Colombo Municipal Council elections in 1926. The decision to enter electoral politics alienated his father but was nevertheless facilitated by his family's connections and wealth (Manor 1989, 65). It was as a member of the Ceylon National Congress (CNC) that Bandaranaike later obtained his first ministerial portfolio and moved up the political hierarchy of the State Council. Styled after the Indian National Congress, the CNC was an elite body of politicians which was politically far more conservative and loosely organised than its Indian counterpart. Throughout his time in the State Council, Bandaranaike was unable to secure the level of power and responsibility he desired. He clashed constantly with the two leading Sinhala politicians of the CNC, D. S. Senanayake, who became the first prime minister of independent Ceylon, and D. B. Jayatilaka (de Silva 1981; Manor 1989, 94). In 1936 Bandaranaike formed his own movement, the *Sinhala Maha Sabha* (SMS), which was based ostensibly on Fabian ideals of gradual socialist reform, but it received little grassroots backing. The formation of the SMS was in part a response to the granting of universal franchise in 1931, which created a need for elite politicians to engage in popular politics. The fact that Bandaranaike chose to form a movement based on Sinhala-majority identity suggests he had some awareness of the growing Sinhala identity consciousness outside his elite political circle; but, as we shall see, this was a vague grasp of the many shades and nuances of this rising Sinhala consciousness.

In 1946, like most CNC politicians, Bandaranaike joined the newly formed United National Party, led by D. S. Senanayake. In 1948 he became a member of independent Sri Lanka's first cabinet under the premiership of Senanayake. Three years later Bandaranaike broke decisively with Senanayake and the United National Party following a series of bitter disputes over socio-economic reform in the country. This rift led to Bandaranaike forming the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which merged with the *Sinhala Maha Sabha* (de Silva 1981, 517). Before this, in 1943, when Bandaranaike had felt no compulsion towards politically mobilising the 'people', he supported parity status for Tamil and Sinhala languages. In this clannish political culture the quasi-feudal elite could easily form inter-ethnic alliances (DeVotta 2009, 39). Bandaranaike began adopting a more visibly pro-Sinhala nationalist stance with the

formation of the SLFP in 1951, but only supported the ‘Sinhala Only’ policy, whereby Sinhala would become the sole official language of the country, as the 1956 election approached (DeVotta 2009: 62). This policy was justified by the view that the Sinhalese were the majority and were the ‘authentic’ inhabitants of the island, given their history, and that under colonialism they had suffered economic, cultural and social deprivation more than any other community.

Bandaranaike reached the pinnacle of his political life with the SLFP-led coalition’s victory in the 1956 general election, after which he became the fourth prime minister of independent Sri Lanka. Before the 1956 election Bandaranaike’s political position had begun to shift increasingly towards representing exclusive Sinhala and Buddhist interests. Soon after the election victory he enacted the disastrous ‘Sinhala-only’ bill to make Sinhala the official language of the country. Tamil political and public opposition to this bill and counter-opposition by Sinhala groups led to independent Sri Lanka’s first instance of ethnic rioting in June 1956. Amidst these inter-ethnic tensions, Bandaranaike moved ahead with his decolonisation programme by closing British air and naval bases in Sri Lanka and moving towards a non-aligned foreign policy. Internally, various subsidies and social welfare programmes were introduced but the pace and magnitude of these reforms were felt to be insufficient by certain groups, especially the Sinhala cultural revivalists who expected a radical transformation in language and culture (Manor 1989, 263–4).

In 1957 Bandaranaike sought to address the language dispute, and the intimately related issue of Tamil demand for greater autonomy, through a pact with the leader of the main Tamil political party, S. J. V. Chelvanayagam. But the idea of devolving power to Tamil-dominated areas was strongly opposed by various Sinhala groups. In 1958 – following a campaign in which public buses carrying the Sinhala letter ‘sri’ were defaced in Tamil-dominated areas – there were widespread protests and pressure, especially from a group of Buddhist monks, for Bandaranaike to abrogate the pact with Chelvanayagam. Capitulating to these demands, he publicly abrogated the pact and also proscribed Chelvanayagam’s Federal Party (Manor 1989, 286–9). The inter-ethnic tensions arising from this conflict led to the worst ethnic violence of Bandaranaike’s tenure, when organised Sinhala gangs attacked Tamil businesses and homes (Vittachi 1958). Emergency rule had to be declared throughout the country to bring the situation under control. By this time, Bandaranaike’s political image had lost credibility and he was viewed with suspicion by many Sinhala and Tamil groups. In 1959

Bandaranaike was shot in his home by a Buddhist monk and later died in hospital. Popular lore holds that the assassination was a plot by Sinhala Buddhist elements dissatisfied with Bandaranaike's commitment to their interests. However, it is more likely that the killing was motivated by petty personal and business rivalries (Manor 1989, 315–16).

After his death Bandaranaike became something of a legend and a martyr. Sinhala nationalists see 1956 as a pivotal moment when a comprador elite was displaced and the true sons of the soil managed to gain at least a tenuous political foothold in a system of governance that had long excluded them. Much policymaking by Sinhala-dominated governments in Sri Lanka since 1956 has been implicitly or explicitly targeted at 'correcting' these perceived historical injustices (Barrow 2014). For Tamil nationalists, 1956 and Bandaranaike represent a watershed moment of political and cultural marginalisation in the newly formed nation state. Bandaranaike's legacy, even in Sinhala nationalist discourse, has remained ambiguous. His clear anglicised identity has prevented him being appropriated as a folk nationalist hero. At the same time, Bandaranaike is too important a figure to be left out of the Sinhala nationalist narrative. As I will explore in [Chapter 5](#), Sinhala nationalist discourse sometimes adopts Bandaranaike as someone who instinctively tapped into an organic and transcendental Sinhala authenticity. However, this appropriation is suffused with irony, since Bandaranaike's writing shows he was someone who laboured hard to fashion an idea of authenticity, thus exposing the constructed nature of the discourse of nationalist authenticity in general.

Oxford memoirs of Bandaranaike – conquering the metropolis and nationalist awakenings

Before I am their equal I must first be their superior.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 14)

Bandaranaike's 'Memories of Oxford' was serialised in the *Ceylon Causerie* magazine between 1933 and 1935. Taken together these Oxford memoirs form a comprehensive narrative of his time at the university in the early 1920s. They were written at a time when Bandaranaike was struggling to establish himself as a significant presence in Ceylonese politics as a member of the CNC. When suffrage was being deliberated in 1927 by the Donoughmore Commission appointed to make recommendations for constitutional reform, a

CNC delegation, of which Bandaranaike was a member, argued that voting should be limited on the basis of income, a literacy test or property, depending on gender. Only the charismatic labour leader A. E. Goonesinghe clamoured for suffrage for the working classes (de Silva 1981, 418–21).

The memoirs were published following a brief overtly Gandhian phase in Bandaranaike's political life. He adopted native dress, advocated civil disobedience and promoted the adoption of a pastoral non-modern lifestyle. These moves gained little traction among his conservative peers, however, and Bandaranaike abandoned this project, retaining only the native dress (Manor 1989, 98–10). The desire to project an authentic image through dress suggests that Bandaranaike was conscious of and felt the need to participate in what Nira Wickramasinghe (2006, 92–111) calls 'dressing and caring for the authentic body', which was part of a larger late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century effort to create an authentic public image for Sinhala men and women. But Bandaranaike's adoption of native dress remained at the level of a change in an outward marker rather than a substantive change in political culture – a limitation reflected in the larger political milieu he operated in and the values refracted in his Oxford memoirs. Placed in this context, Bandaranaike's memoirs can be seen as a guarded document that serves multiple purposes. At one level they establish his credentials within the conservative political culture of the time as a man steeped in British gentlemanly values and someone who had gained the prestigious position of secretary of the Oxford Union. At the same time, the memoirs try to place Bandaranaike in the currents of decolonising discourse of the time – an attempt that a critical reading of the memoirs demonstrates was undermined by its appeal to British values and its unwillingness to go beyond a superficial critique of elite British culture.

Deliberately invoking the schoolboy/varsity adventure genre through references to Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861), Bandaranaike scripts his narrative as an ironic contrast between the naïveté of his childhood reading and the reality of a colonial subject's experience in a bastion of British learning. But the narrative is triumphal and portrays Bandaranaike's victory in proving his worth as all the more significant for the racial prejudices he had to overcome. Three themes dominate the memoirs: how Bandaranaike overcame the racially biased insularity of Oxbridge society; his ambiguous position vis-à-vis other colonised people, particularly Indians; and the emergence of his own nationalist consciousness.

The Oxford memoirs, addressed primarily to a Sri Lankan English-speaking audience, can be seen as providing legitimacy for Bandaranaike's political aspirations. Since Britain, its culture, system of education and governance were held in high esteem by elite social circles in Sri Lanka at that time, Bandaranaike's credentials as a man thoroughly familiar with these aspects of British life are stressed. The figure of an ideal British gentleman aristocrat and a set of positive values associated with this image dominate the Oxford memoirs. The implicit anti-colonialism of the memoirs coexists with this 'liberal' image of British identity. Bandaranaike sees his triumph at Oxford as enabled by this code of gentlemanly liberality – a discourse that, Lauren Goodland observes, was a mid-Victorian resurrection of a quasi-feudal appeal to social hierarchy which in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain became 'a powerful descriptive basis for a myth of disinterested governance by an Oxbridge elite' (Goodland 2003, 26). Bandaranaike presents gentlemanly values as a universal discourse that can transcend the unnamed or unnamable racial bar – because naming racism seems too threatening to his self-identity.

Though the Oxford memoirs begin with a sense of cultural and class-based dislocation, references to Bandaranaike's privileged background interrupt this narrative of marginalisation. For instance, we are told at the beginning that it was 'not just an accident ... [that] my name was entered [by my father] ... in the books of Christ Church, about ten years before I actually went up' (Bandaranaike 1963, 3). Equally revealing is the tone of disdain with which he describes his lower middle-class British landlord Bates's house, effectively identifying himself as the equivalent of the British upper middle class:

Oh! The horror of that sitting-room. Drab, dreary, smug – two smug porcelain figures on the mantelpiece with a square box in the centre, smugly pretending to be a clock, although it had long since ceased to function as such, the smug upright chairs with their dreary reddish upholstery, the dingy curtain – it nearly drove me mad.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 7)

In Oxford itself, among his peers, neither Bandaranaike's wealth nor his privileged background can provide him the acceptance he desires. His marginality is brought home when he finds himself a mere spectator standing outside the inner circle of the Junior Common Room. Observing the jubilant entrance of Edward Marjoribanks – a young aristocrat and a later friend and role model of Bandaranaike's – into the Common Room, Bandaranaike

comments, 'How I envied him ... How sadly I wondered ... whether I would ever be greeted like that myself?' (1963, 8). Such acceptance, as the narrative chronicles, does not come easily, especially given the insidious nature of the racial discrimination in polite Oxbridge society:

With positive rudeness or brutal frankness one might be able to deal more or less effectively ... The trouble was far more subtle and deep seated: in a variety of ways one was always being shown, politely but unmistakably, that one was simply not wanted.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 9)

In the triumphalist trajectory of the memoirs this produces not despair, but firm resolve. The solution Bandaranaike sees to this marginalisation is to achieve fame and recognition at Oxford: 'Before I am their equal I must first be their superior' (Bandaranaike 1963, 14). It is in this narrative of resolve, struggle and ultimate triumph that one sees the idea of British gentlemanly values crystallised in practice. If an insidious racism permeates early twentieth-century Oxbridge society, Bandaranaike conceives gentlemanly values as a universal discourse that can transcend such divisions:

An Englishman is generous in recognising merit in others; it is more difficult to overcome the various barriers to his friendship. Once, however, his respect is obtained, it is easy to become his friend, if one reasonably conforms to his standards. And what a true and loyal friend he can be!

(Bandaranaike 1963, 17)

This is unlike a typical anti-colonial critique that would attempt to construct the nationalist thinker's culture as a superior foil to British culture. It yet again reflects the conservative Sri Lankan socio-cultural milieu. However, in attempting to appeal to a gentlemanly code, traces of a masculinist reaction to the feminisation of colonised people in colonial discourse can be discerned (Nandy 1983). The rhetoric of Dharmapala also carried overtones of such a masculine discourse – projecting the Sinhalese as a historically virile and technologically advanced people descending from Aryan racial stock (Guruge 1991 [1965], 481–2). John Kotelawala, the father of Sir John Kotelawala, the third prime minister of Sri Lanka, and the man whom Bandaranaike succeeded in 1956, was a more aggressive example of this hyper-masculinity. Kotelawala was known for his physical altercations with locals as well as the British and

is sometimes portrayed as an anti-colonial folk hero in popular culture. Dharmapala used to uphold Kotelawala as a role model and spoke admiringly of his antics (Gulawatta 2010).

If the internalisation of gentlemanly values brings Bandaranaike closer to Oxbridge society, it also places him in an ambiguous relationship with Indians and with other colonial subjects of the British Empire. In the debates at the Oxford Union, Bandaranaike regularly represented an Indian position – a role that he seems to have welcomed because it allowed him to claim a transnational anti-colonial stance. Bandaranaike's greatest oratorical triumph at the Union was in a debate on India where he defended the proposition 'that indefinite continuance of British rule in India is a violation of British political ideals' (Bandaranaike 1963, 43). This is not dissimilar to the way Dharmapala presented himself in Japan as a representative of Indian Buddhism rather than as a Sri Lankan; we see again the strategically shifting nature of the 'authenticity' claimed by these individuals.

Bandaranaike (1963, 46) notes that 'I ... interpreted the problems of that country [India] in terms of those of my own'. Privately, though, Bandaranaike seems to have abhorred Indian social life at Oxford. This distaste seems to have been a product of his elitism and insecurity about being marginalised on the basis of race or colour. In the memoirs Indians are presented as culturally deracinated victims, and Bandaranaike notes he kept away from their social functions (Bandaranaike 1963, 47). The memoirs portray a man who has privately remained anglophile while publicly cultivating a persona of anti-colonialism – a contradiction also visible in his longstanding political relationship with the CNC and its conservative brand of politics.

Bandaranaike's sense of elitism and exceptionalism extended to the ways he viewed and interacted with Sri Lankans:

Indian traditions and culture had wilted in the inhospitable soil of foreign rule, while on the other hand, British culture had failed to take any deep root. Many Indians, therefore – indeed, like ourselves – possessed neither the one nor the other.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 47)

This passage refers as much to the anglicised Sri Lankan social circles that Bandaranaike was intimately familiar with as it does to Indians at Oxford. Bandaranaike had a dismissive attitude towards the anglicised elite of Sri Lanka and also the idea of the Brown Sahib – a comical figure of colonial derision that his father, with his penchant for British manners

and lifestyle, in some ways represented (Manor 1989, 10–11, 26, 60–1). This lack of culture – culture here, as in most of Bandaranaike’s writing, signifies an edifying discourse close to an Arnoldian conception of high culture – is seen as producing a number of weaknesses in the majority of Indians at Oxford: dishonesty, servility and lack of character. Though he reads this with some sympathy as a general malaise resulting from the condition of being dominated – ‘nothing rots the soul of a man like slavery, whether it be that of an individual or a nation’ (Bandaranaike 1963, 48) – he sees himself as rising above the effects of such cultural deracination. Bandaranaike claims that ‘[the] iron that had entered into my soul in the earlier period of my Varsity career ... saved me from being more submissive to, and receptive of, the influence of the University; from acquiring, for instance, an Oxford manner and an Oxford accent’ (Bandaranaike 1963, 42). However, he is known to have used the ‘Oxford accent’ to strategic advantage (Gooneratne 1986, 84), and Manor (1989, 11) notes, ‘he never forgot, nor let others forget, that he excelled at the Oxford of Anthony Eden and Evelyn Waugh’ (Manor 1989, 11).

Although moments such as this show how Bandaranaike’s familial origins haunted his Oxford experiences, Sri Lanka as a country and culture is largely absent from ‘Memories of Oxford’ until it makes a sudden and cheesy appearance at the end. As Bandaranaike scripts his departure from the university, the narrative nostalgically reflects upon his time at Oxford. Standing upon Magdalen Bridge, on the very route that the narrative earlier records as the site where his decision to prevail over the insularity of Oxbridge society was made, Bandaranaike (1963, 59) reflects that his ‘life’s mission’ lies in his homeland. The idyllic English scene from the bridge is juxtaposed with a harsher reality of home:

The typically English scene, subdued and mellow in the evening light, faded away from my eyes, and the glare and dust of my own country took its place: blue skies and dancing sunlight, with a white road winding amidst coconut groves and green paddy fields; dark cool nights, with star bejewelled skies ... the pathetic, huddled village huts, the dirt, the poverty, the disease. My country, my people. Aye, it was there my work lay, and Oxford had revealed to me my life’s mission.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 59)

Coming at the end of the memoirs, this passage gathers up the narrative of Bandaranaike’s triumph at Oxford – a narrative that demonstrates his

strength of character and an implicit anti-colonial victory in his conquest of the university – and projects him as someone capable of guiding his homeland in the future.

A footnote to the Oxford memoirs is a very short story Bandaranaike published in the *Island Review* in 1926, a year after he returned from Oxford. The tension between a private anglophile self and a public anti-colonial persona, evident in the memoirs, is foreshadowed in this story. In the story, simply entitled ‘Kandy Perahera’, a young protagonist, John Ratnaike, is watching the annual pageant (*perahera*) of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy – the repository of one of the most important Buddhist relics in Sri Lanka. John, an anglicised youth, watches the pageant from the balcony of the Queen’s Hotel, an exclusive vantage point, while he and his friends play cards. While gazing at the pageant John experiences a moment similar to Bandaranaike on Magdalen Bridge: the pageant disappears from view and he is drawn into the glorious Sinhala culture he believes the pageant signifies. He also begins to identify himself with the ‘common’ people at street level. He is dragged back from this reverie when his friends at the card table call him and he finds himself tugging at his shirt – an outward marker of his westernisation. The story ends here. The anonymous editors of Bandaranaike’s *Speeches and Writings* (1963) note, ‘It is believed that Mr. Bandaranaike was writing about himself in this story’ (Bandaranaike 1963, 466). The narrative illustrates how Bandaranaike approaches authenticity. Unable to project or claim authenticity as something inherent to his self-identity, but at the same time operating in a discourse that saw authenticity as something natural and transcendental, he looks for authenticity in various outward markers in culture and history. A similar theme is echoed in less autobiographical terms in his short story ‘The Mystery of the Missing Candidate’ (Bandaranaike 1963, 467–90), where an aristocratic man who enters politics suddenly disappears close to an election, unable to contend with the populist demands placed on him. He is later found seeking refuge in a Buddhist hermitage and wanting to renounce his wealth and anglicised privilege. In some ways the ambivalence of the two protagonists in these short stories is a metaphor for elite Sri Lankan politics: the lack of an intimate understanding of the people is substituted by a romanticised and essentialist notion of culture and how people ought to be.

The turn to the indigenous in Bandaranaike suggests that he was aware of growing Sinhala and Buddhist identity consciousness among intermediate elite groups. As Dharmadasa (1992, 117–25) notes, much of this activity was tied to the innovative use of the print medium, and there was an exponential growth of Sinhala periodicals from the 1860s

to the 1890s. There were parallel movements in constructing local authenticity in dress, vernacular education, images of the past, and theatre (Wickramasinghe 2006, 73–111). Many like Dharmapala were also bilingual and a significant portion of their ideas appeared in English print. It is possible that Bandaranaike read their work. There is anecdotal evidence that Bandaranaike may have listened to Dharmapala speaking in public (Herath 2011). Although Bandaranaike, and other elite figures may have been aware of these trends and at times have come into contact with them, they do not appear to have had any substantive or affective engagement with them. Whether or not they encountered Dharmapala or his ideas directly, there is a degree of discursive congruence between the elite imagination of a glorious Sinhala past and the ways that others such as Dharmapala, from a different social stratum, saw the country's past and authenticity. One can see this as a contested field where the anglicised elite and educated Sinhala intelligentsia fought to claim custodianship over discourses considered authentic and thereby to stake a moral and political claim to be 'representative' in a broad sense. Bandaranaike staging the Kandy Perahera as a site of authenticity, in this context, is no accident. Orientalist scholars such as Ananda Coomaraswamy idealised Kandyan Sinhala identity as authentic compared with the so-called Low Country Sinhalese, who owing to colonisation of the maritime areas of the island were seen as more culturally 'corrupted' (Brow 1999). As Wickramasinghe (2006, 94) argues multiple discourses of authenticity with different temporal and spatial coordinates coexisted in early twentieth-century Sri Lanka, as is indeed the case today as well. This too points to the inconsistency and mobility of the discourse of authenticity in Bandaranaike's thought – shifting between the distant past and more recent times.

Gandhi, the village and authenticity

In 1933 Bandaranaike authored a short booklet on indigenous economic and social revitalisation called the *The Spinning Wheel and the Paddy Field* (Bandaranaike 1963, 550–609). The village of antiquity is imagined in this project as an idealised vision of precolonial harmony: a site of economic self-sufficiency and moral order. The overtly Gandhian inspiration for this project is evident in the iconic image of the spinning wheel. This is consistent with the revivalist momentum that permeated much nationalist thought not only in South Asia but also in Africa and found its way into, for example, Chinua Achebe's fiction published around the time of Nigeria's independence.

The idea of village revitalisation in Sri Lanka is not unique to Bandaranaike. D. S. Senanayake – independent Sri Lanka’s first prime minister – carried out the restoration and expansion of ancient irrigation works alongside farmer resettlement schemes. From the time he was minister of lands and agriculture in the State Council in the 1930s, Senanayake drew upon historical images of an ancient hydraulic civilisation (Manor 1989; Gunawardena 1971). Furthermore, there was remarkable consistency in how the twentieth-century Sri Lankan elites regarded the peasantry and village life from a custodial or tutelary perspective (Moore 1985; 1992; Samaraweera 1981). The idealised historical imaginary that informed such an attitude, argues Moore (1985, 3, 117–71, 119–20), had a negative impact on policymaking because it propagated misconceptions about the economic and social structure of the peasantry.

Bandaranaike’s visions of spinning and paddy cultivation reflect different aspects of an idealised image of the past. The idea of spinning comes from a Gandhian vision and paddy cultivation from a more locally grounded imaginary, but both serve as marks of the notion of timeless authenticity that came to permeate public culture.

In expressing his vision for Sri Lanka, Bandaranaike integrates an idealistic critique of what he sees as Western models of development. His narrative sees capitalism, industrialism and colonialism as intimately connected forces that produce social disintegration. Capitalism with its need for surplus is seen as driving demand for production, which in turn necessitates, and is enabled by, industrial production. Industrialism is seen as a malign force that alienates workers from their products and creates reliance on what Bandaranaike (1963, 558) calls the ‘Machine-God’. Colonialism, he suggests, is the third party in this destructive project, because as capitalism exhausts domestic markets and resources it has to expand outwards. A stark vision of industrial Europe facing mass technological unemployment pervades this narrative and invokes the horrors of the workhouse. Using a reference to Charles Dickens (Bandaranaike 1963, 559), he compares industrial society to a form of modern slavery. He also quotes Gandhi to illustrate the threat posed by industrialism: ‘Machinery has begun to desolate Europe. Ruination is now knocking at the English gates. Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin’ (Bandaranaike 1963, 555). While acknowledging benefits created by industrial society, such as low-cost goods and increased employment opportunities, Bandaranaike sees this idea of progress as unsustainable partly on the basis of leftist critiques of capitalism but at the same time because he sees industrialisation as alien to the authenticity of ‘Eastern’ life.

The alternative offered to this bleak future is a return to tradition. Bandaranaike is conscious that such thinking can be seen as naïve and idealistic and says, ‘We are only too well aware of the tendency to praise unduly ... the conditions of life in the distant past ... [W]e are apt to cast longing eyes to a state of things which, dimmed and obscured by time and hallowed by sentiment cannot be appraised with any degree of accuracy’ (Bandaranaike 1963, 553). But he ignores his own call for critical awareness. Providing rather thin historical evidence to establish spinning as an ancient industry in Sri Lanka, Bandaranaike associates spinning with precolonial village ethics:

... the sturdy peasantry, who are admittedly the backbone of this country, lived in simplicity and contentment under our ancient system of village government. And what a fine system it was! The village Pansala [temple] supplying the religious needs of the village community, the village school, often under the guidance of the Bhikkus, providing the necessary education ...

But the stupidity and short-sightedness of foreign rule have progressively frittered away and shaken to pieces the excellent fabric of government. It is said by an historian that if you were to take a Sinhalese peasant from his plough and wash the mud off him he would be fit to rule the State.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 572)

The essence of Sinhala identity in this thinking lies in the village – in its rustic simplicity, in the pastoral moral order of its people tempered by a Buddhist worldview but at the same time moulded by a grander historical vision of an advanced hydraulic civilisation that has long disappeared but has left its traces upon this idealised village. The imagination at work here has some procedural similarities to Dharmapala. While Dharmapala openly castigated villagers, Bandaranaike looks at them with benevolent condescension. As we shall see in [Chapter 5](#), the village functions as a site of national authenticity in Gunadasa Amarasekara’s imagination as well, though the function, emphasis and place of the village there differ from what we find in Dharmapala and Bandaranaike.

Paddy cultivation, the other key element in Bandaranaike’s project, is something that takes inspiration from both empirical reality and historical consciousness. Though paddy cultivation was a long-established agricultural practice in Sri Lanka, it was not as critical to the rural economy as Bandaranaike and other members of the political elite thought (Moore 1985, 87). Mick Moore (1985, 117) also suggests that the elite promoted

paddy cultivation not primarily because it would benefit the peasantry financially, but because it was associated with an idea of precolonial rural harmony. It also allowed the peasantry to be imagined and managed in a politically conservative manner that would not threaten the elite. In an anecdote about his early political career Bandaranaike recounts an old farmer and his son coming to meet him. The father fits Bandaranaike's vision of the authentic peasant farmer, but the son in 'European dress' is the target of ridicule (Bandaranaike 1963, 571).

Though paddy cultivation is not as directly associated with an ethical discourse as spinning, the historical imaginary that informs it derives from a similar idealised vision of the past. One of the major factors influencing this historical imaginary is the possibility of claiming coevalness, or even anteriority, to European civilisation. As in Dharmapala, colonial sociology and history strongly shape Bandaranaike's view of the past. He quotes Ramsay MacDonald – the British Labour prime minister of the 1920s – addressing a Sri Lankan audience:

I, who represent a race which was then small, insignificant, and almost unknown to the world, [stood] there representing the power of my people, reflecting and brooding upon the fall of others. What does it mean? What is its warning? What is its moral? I saw your beautiful temples, your beautiful palaces ... they [past rulers of Sri Lanka] subdued their enemies and then they threw challenges to the world ... yet the jungle has grown where they ruled.

(Ramsay MacDonald quoted in Bandaranaike 1963, 592)

MacDonald's narrative is a cautionary reflection on the decline of civilisation. Sri Lankan people had achieved greatness in the past, long before the English race had gained significance; but the Sri Lankans are now a subject people and the places they once ruled are now in ruins or covered by jungle.

But for Bandaranaike, as for Dharmapala, the antiquity of the Sinhala civilisation provides the inspiration for contemporary national revival. An iconic figure in Sinhala historical consciousness in relation to paddy cultivation is the twelfth-century King Parakramabahu. Parakramabahu's reign is believed to have been one of agricultural excellence. Bandaranaike calls it the 'Golden Age of Lanka, [when] rice was exported to foreign lands as well' (Bandaranaike 1963, 592) The idea of this ancient hydraulic civilisation had already gained both academic and popular currency by the end of the nineteenth century as the twin disciplines of historiography and archaeology combined to produce an

authoritative discourse of Sri Lanka's past. What was read about in texts like the *Mahavamsa* was made physically manifest by archaeology – an imaginative process that, as we shall see in [Chapters 5 and 6](#), persisted well into the 1980s.

As we shall see in [Chapters 5 and 6](#), both post-independence development discourse and the aesthetic imagination were heavily influenced by the idea of ancient Sinhala civilisation and its achievements in irrigation and paddy cultivation. Emerson Tennent's historical writing in the mid nineteenth century notes that the irrigation works and monuments of precolonial Sinhala civilisations 'arrest the traveler in astonishment at their stupendous dimensions' (Tennent 1977 [1860], 270). The power and continuity of this historical narrative is also visible in the work of many post-independence historians, such as K. M. de Silva (1981, 68) and R. A. L. H. Gunawardana (1971), who eulogise the achievements of the hydraulic civilisation and even index the weight of individual stones used in construction.

Buddhism, rationalism and national identity

A somewhat different relationship to authenticity emerges in Bandaranaike's writings on Buddhism. On the one hand, there is a cosmopolitan rationalist understanding of Buddhism which has little to do with local authenticity. On the other hand, there is Buddhism as Sinhala cultural heritage. The negotiation between these two understandings of Buddhism again reflects the tension in Bandaranaike's life between his anglicised background and his need for a public decolonised persona. Bandaranaike's conversion to Buddhism was controversial because of the suspicion that it took place only for instrumental political reasons.

The *Mahavamsa* narrative that links the arrival of Prince Vijaya in Sri Lanka with the Buddha's death, and the idea that the Buddha bequeathed a legacy to the Sinhala people as protectors of Buddhism, played an important role in the late nineteenth-century Sinhala imagination (Dharmapala 1907, 285–6). However, the strong political correlation between Sinhala nationalism and Buddhism is a twentieth-century phenomenon. Given the more politically charged nature of Buddhism in the 1930s, Bandaranaike's conversion to Buddhism was seen at the time (Bond 1988, 91–3), and is still assessed, as a politically opportunistic move (DeVotta 2004, 60). This is partly because Bandaranaike's conversion was part of a pattern of elite conversions to Buddhism spurred by the granting of universal franchise based on the recommendations of

the Donoughmore Commission in 1931. Such converts were derisively called 'Donoughmore Buddhists' (Ames 1963, 45–53). The history of Bandaranaike's extended family, which had changed religious persuasion with successive colonial rulers (Portuguese, Dutch and British), probably added to this public perception (Gooneratne 1986, 3–6).

If the popular appeal of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism is to a mytho-history combining land, religion and race (Bartholomeusz and de Silva 1998; Spencer 1990), in Bandaranaike's writing this remains a peripheral theme. The dominant conception of Buddhism in Bandaranaike is of a rationalist and ethical discourse that operates as a spiritual complement to modern life. In Bandaranaike's writing, Buddhism is largely seen as a universalist discourse with no particular ethno-cultural grounding. Nonetheless, this understanding of Buddhism is at times interrupted by a more exclusive and ethno-culturally grounded idea of Sinhala Buddhism. When Bandaranaike reflects upon his own beliefs the former dominates, but when he attempts to relate Buddhism to the nation the latter becomes more prominent. These two aspects of Buddhism exist in an uneasy dialectic in Bandaranaike's writing. This tension is apparent even though his actions in the public arena shaped the institutionalisation of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism more than those of any other political figure before him.

In an article from the early 1930s, entitled 'Why I Became a Buddhist', Bandaranaike seeks to explain his choice of religion even though 'a man's religious convictions are surely ... matters he shrinks from exposing and parading before the public gaze' (Bandaranaike 1963, 287). Yet in his public role as a national leader this public-private distinction collapses and private choices are invested with larger public importance. Bandaranaike observes that he wrote the article in response to numerous requests to address the issue of why he converted to Buddhism. Though he does not reveal who made such requests or why they were made, one could surmise that suspicion about the motives of his conversion played some role. Bandaranaike seems self-conscious about public perceptions and stresses the personal nature of his choice: 'I proceed to a dissection and analysis of the innermost workings of my mind and heart on this theme. I hope to conduct that operation in as dispassionate a manner as possible' (Bandaranaike 1963, 287).

Bandaranaike begins by talking about how Christianity was an ascribed inheritance. He suggests the religion was never appealing to him because of the restrictions placed on individual freedom by an authoritative and distant God figure. 'While acquiring for Christ a sort of personal affection as towards a kind elder brother ... I never was able to attain

a conception of God' (Bandaranaike 1963, 287). The narrative suggests that the intuitive ambiguity about Christianity in childhood hardened into scepticism at Oxford, where he encountered various rational critiques of the existence of God. Bandaranaike largely agrees with the rationalist understanding of theism – as something originating in the human imagination from the fear of the unknown – but argues that this critique is limited because it does not take into account the historical continuity of religion in human society. He refers to George Bernard Shaw's *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God* (2007 [1932]) – a story about Christian conversion and disillusionment – and agrees with the text's interpretation that the idea of God is man-made and historically contingent. However, he argues that religion continues to exist because it serves a functional purpose in human society. Quoting one of his favourite Roman proverbs – '*homo homini lupus*' (Bandaranaike 1963, 288) (man is a wolf to man) – Bandaranaike makes the familiar argument that religion provides a necessary moral counterbalance to the power of human intellect, which, if left unchecked, can bring about its own destruction. The narrative posits this as a dilemma: the idea of a supernatural God figure is problematic because it can be seen as a human construct, but the denial of God does not obviate the need for religion. The resolution for Bandaranaike lies in a rationalist conception of Buddhism: '[In Buddhist] doctrine ... there is no need for man to be dependent on the will of God ... It is left to me to say that the Buddha Dhamma [doctrine] has emerged triumphant from the test of my reasoning' (Bandaranaike 1963, 290–1).

The article as a whole stresses that Bandaranaike's conversion to Buddhism was a deeply personal choice informed by his rational approach to life. Significantly, it makes no attempt to suggest that he adopted Buddhism as part of his cultural heritage. Two dominant themes, Buddhism's rationalism and its ability to act as an ethical discourse in modern society, permeate Bandaranaike's views on Buddhism. In a public address in 1951, entitled 'Religion and Human Progress', Bandaranaike analyses the role of Buddhism in what he sees as a largely secular, science-dominated and capitalist world order. He refers to James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1995 [1890]) – another indication of the rationalist framework in which Bandaranaike approaches the idea of religion – and argues that Frazer's evolutionary perspective of religion is largely accurate. But he disagrees with Frazer's belief that as human civilisation progresses the need for religion will altogether disappear and be replaced by science.

In this speech Bandaranaike argues that religion will serve the functional purpose of being a 'protective coloring for the human mind'

(Bandaranaike 1963, 311). He does not invoke Buddhism as a particular cultural legacy of the Sinhalese. He is also careful to note that religion as a whole, not just Buddhism, has an important role in the modern world. Turning again to one of his favourite themes, that the materialism of capitalism has precipitated a moral crisis in modern society, he contends that 'Asia had for some hundreds of years been subject to western capitalist imperialism, and her great religions languished during this period of servitude' (Bandaranaike 1963, 312). When he calls for a Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka he also notes that 'You will remember that I stressed earlier the importance of the religious idea as such. So that Buddhists, in performing this task [of revival] for Buddhism, should not do injury to any other religion' (Bandaranaike 1963, 313).

A more ambiguous position regarding Buddhism and its relationship to Sri Lanka emerges in a national address Bandaranaike made on Vesak in 1953, three years before his ascension to power on a Sinhala Buddhist political platform. Vesak is a crucial day in the Buddhist calendar. The Buddha's birth, enlightenment and death are thought to have occurred on this date. For Sinhala Buddhists it has a further ethno-cultural significance because in nationalist readings of the *Mahavamsa* mytho-history the founding father of the community, Prince Vijaya, is said to have arrived in Sri Lanka on the day of the Buddha's death. Historian K. M. de Silva (1981, 4), though sceptical of the chronicle's chronology, upholds the ideological link between land, religion and race by arguing that the *Mahavamsa* foretells that Sri Lanka and the Sinhala race will be the future protectors of his doctrine.

Bandaranaike's opening words in the radio broadcast move from what is arguably universal to the particular:

This day on which the Buddha was born, attained Enlightenment, and passed away, is not only sacred to all Buddhists generally, but has a special significance for the Sinhalese race, because of the Vesak Full-Moon Poya day landing of Vijaya in Sri Lanka. We are told by the Mahawamsa that the Buddha Himself entrusted the care of this land and the nascent race to God Sakra.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 318)

This passage is resonant of what Gananath Obeyesekere (1995) calls the tension between Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist history. Writing for *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* edited by Martin R. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (1995), Obeyesekere makes a comparative argument that, unlike the monotheistic religions of West Asia, Buddhism does not

have a doctrinal basis that can support a modern fundamentalist project. Obeyesekere contends that Buddhist doctrine carries no particular validation of the idea of forming a ‘just’ community – something he argues is central to a fundamentalist project – and also no doctrinal basis for making such communities in the world through “‘just” wars or “holy” wars’ (Obeyesekere 1995, 233). However, Obeyesekere argues that Buddhist history often sanctions violence, as in the *Mahavamsa* where the iconic Sinhala King Dutugemunu’s killing of his enemies is justified because it is done to protect Buddhist institutions. Obeyesekere’s attempt to draw a neat distinction between Buddhist doctrine and Buddhist history is problematic. It replicates the demarcation between a pure doctrinal Buddhism and an impure popular version, which is evident in the Orientalist–rationalist appropriation of Buddhism in the nineteenth century. The impossibility of this distinction is visible in Sri Lankan history, where Buddhism has played a central role in the state. Bandaranaike’s speech reproduces the tension of attempting to separate doctrine from history.

Although the extract above moves from a universal Buddhism to a more particularistic one, the entire speech oscillates between these polarities. Having invoked the narrative of the Sinhala Buddhist past, Bandaranaike does not dwell upon the historical or particularistic relevance of the religion to the Sinhala community. Instead he embarks on an explication based on the kind of rationalist understanding of the religion expressed in his other writing. At the end of the speech, there is a movement from this universal–rationalist aspect to the more particularistic, and once again back to the universal. Adopting a reformist tone, Bandaranaike urges a return to the doctrinal basis of the religion and argues that such a return

shall not only more adequately do homage to our Great Teacher, not only benefitting ourselves individually, but also fostering the true interests of our sore-stricken race, which the Buddha Himself honoured with His compassionate concern.

Lastly, we shall be able to rise above the bounds of nationality, to embrace all life itself and sincerely to say, and say most fittingly on this day of all days, those simple and oft-repeated, but magnificent words: ‘May all living beings be well and happy’.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 321)

The religion is once again identified in terms of its relevance to a particular group – the Sinhala race. However, the race will benefit not

simply because the Buddha blessed it but because the fundamentals of the doctrine are adhered to – values such as compassion which are in fact universal. Paradoxically, therefore, embracing the Buddhist ideal will lead to the transcendence of the very idea of ‘race’, which is posited as synonymous with ‘nationality’. As the words at the end of the passage suggest, the Buddhist ‘prayer’ for happiness and health is for all human beings and not limited to a particular community. Such a limitation could be read as a violation of the religion’s ethical principles.

This interplay between the universal and the particular is not a tension unique to Buddhism. Arguably all religions have such a universal–particular dichotomy. As movements arising from particular socio-historical contexts they are marked by the traces of their historicity, yet at the same time they desire to overcome such socio-historical specificity to become transcendental discourses. Bandaranaike’s speech, though embedded in the particular historical context of Sri Lanka, demonstrates this more general feature of religious discourse. But read within Sri Lanka’s specific ethno-religious history, and articulated by a political leader who is clearly aware of its political significance, this example of the universal–particularist dynamic suggests a man who is trying to present himself as both transnational and nationalist. Though this is a position Banadaranaike can sustain rhetorically, it is something he failed to do politically. The damaging consequences of Bandaranaike’s implementation of the Sinhala Only policy and his courting of the Sinhala Buddhist movement are still felt in Sri Lanka today.

The Sinhala-only debate: Bandaranaike as the advocate of Sinhala interests

The most defining legacy of Bandaranaike’s political career was the establishment of Sinhala as the sole official language of the country, a policy that led to the institutionalisation of Sinhala nationalism. Before Bandaranaike came to power in 1956, Prime Minister D. S. Senanayake’s regime had initiated programmes that exclusively benefited the Sinhala majority, such as the irrigation schemes and resettlement of Sinhala farmers mentioned earlier in this chapter. But the enactment of the Sinhala language policy was a symbolic and institutional act around which Sinhala and Tamil nationalism decisively crystallised separate visions of nationhood. In the Sinhala nationalist narrative it signifies a long-awaited realisation of the promise of decolonisation. For Tamil nationalism it signifies both the independent nation’s symbolic and

institutional refusal to recognise Tamil interests, and the accompanying threat of cultural and institutional marginalisation. The policy also marks the beginning of a process that increasingly folded the notion of 'nation' into a mono-ethnic and mono-religious Sinhala Buddhist discourse. In Bandaranaike's Vesak speech we saw a rhetorical slide from the Sinhala race to the idea of nation. This became an institutional reality in the decades after 1950. As Jayadeva Uyangoda notes, the Sinhala term for 'nation', *jathiya*, connotes both race and nation, and the Sinhala term *jathiya godanageema* (developing the nation), which gained currency in the 1970s, came to mean developing the Sinhala as opposed to the Sri Lankan nation (Uyangoda 1994, 13).

Here I look at the speeches Bandaranaike made in the legislature while the Official Languages Act was being debated. Though Bandaranaike invokes a number of elements that relate to Sinhala nationalist consciousness, his rhetorical strategies at times position him at a distance from the very exclusionary ideological interests he represents. The consciousness of a majoritarian Sinhala right to the nation informs these speeches. But the immediate reasons for making Sinhala the single official language, the fear that Sinhala language and culture are under threat, is something Bandaranaike seems hesitant to endorse.

The need to vernacularise a number of aspects of public and institutional life had been proposed as early as 1932 with the adoption of the Donoughmore constitutional reforms (Dharmadasa 1992, 239). Universal franchise in 1931, and hence the need for mass political appeal, was one of the main reasons the local political elite adopted the promotion of vernaculars as a political cause; for most of them English remained affectively and practically their primary language. As a result of the structural political changes of the Donoughmore reforms, the need to use vernacular languages in law courts and administration and to displace English from its pre-eminent position was expressed in motions presented to the State Council in 1932 and 1936 (Dharmadasa 1992, 240–8). However, in the earlier phases of this indigenising movement, called the *swabasha* (local languages) movement, the emphasis was on both Tamil and Sinhala. It was only in 1943 that J. R. Jayawardene, who in 1978 became the first executive president of Sri Lanka, made the first State Council proposal to make Sinhala the single official language of the country, though this proposal was later amended to include Tamil (Coperahewa 2009, 104). Most historians and linguists tend to read this shift towards an exclusively Sinhala position as a natural outcome of universal suffrage (de Silva 1981; Dharmadasa 1992; Coperahewa 2009), but such a reading fails to take into account the early history of

the language movement, in which both Sinhala and Tamil politicians supported both languages. The shift to Sinhala, as Bandaranaike's career illustrates, was a politically expedient move. He supported granting equal status to both languages in 1943, when the original Official Languages Act was proposed, and maintained this position till 1953 (Wilson 1994, 58). It was only with the prospect of the 1956 general election that Bandaranaike began openly campaigning on a Sinhala Only platform.

In speeches made in parliament in 1955, before his election victory, and in 1956 following it, Bandaranaike unequivocally advocated that Sinhala be made the single official language. In making his case Bandaranaike drew heavily upon some cardinal elements of the dominant Sinhala nationalist narrative, projecting the Sinhalese as a threatened community attempting to assert its rightful position in the nation:

... the fears of the Sinhalese, I do not think can be brushed aside as completely frivolous. I believe there are a not inconsiderable number of Tamils in this country out of a population of eight million. Then there are forty or fifty million [Tamil] people in the adjoining country. What about all this Tamil literature, Tamil teachers, even films, papers, and magazines? ... I do not think [there is] an unjustified fear of the inexorable shrinking of the Sinhalese language. It is a fear that cannot be brushed aside.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 394–5)

This passage is a clear expression of the insecurities invoked by Sinhala nationalists to rationalise their desire for hegemony. Scholars like Neil DeVotta have called this aspect of Sinhala nationalist consciousness a 'majority with a minority complex' (DeVotta 2004, 62). One of the fears invoked here is the threat of pan-Dravidianism. The perceived ethno-cultural affinities between Sri Lankan Tamils and Tamils in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu are seen as a potential threat that could swamp the cultural and political identity of the numerically smaller Sinhala group. Thus, though a clear numerical majority in Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese see themselves as a minority in the regional context. But as the first line of the quotation above suggests – 'these fears of the Sinhalese, I do not think can be brushed aside as completely frivolous' – there is an element of exaggeration to these claims which Bandaranaike implicitly acknowledges. He presents the Sinhala perspective but at the same time maintains some distance from it. A comparison of Bandaranaike's comments with those of Sri Lankan historian K. M. de Silva, writing just over two decades later on the same subject, reveals the continuity

of such Sinhala nationalist thinking. This comparison also reveals commonalities in how the 'liberal' Sinhala intelligentsia invoke such popular nationalist polemic but at the same time maintain a distance that allows them to appear more liberal or enlightened. De Silva writes in *A History of Sri Lanka*,

The fact is that the Sinhalese, although an overwhelming majority of the population of the island, nevertheless have a minority complex vis-à-vis the Tamils. They feel encircled by the more than 50 million Tamil-speaking people who inhabit the present-day Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka. Within Sri Lanka the Sinhalese outnumber the Tamils by more than three to one; but they in turn are outnumbered by nearly six to one by the Tamil-speaking people of South Asia.

Historical tradition and geography separate Tamils of Sri Lanka and Tamilnadu from each other, and in the early years of Sri Lanka's independence the Tamils of the North and East of the island had showed little inclination to identify themselves with the Tamils of Tamilnadu. The only link between the two groups was language. Nevertheless, the Sinhalese feared this possibility, and the campaign for federalism aggravated these fears.

(De Silva 1981, 513–14)

De Silva writes these words as contextual background to explain the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 and the resulting ethnic violence. Though they acknowledge that such claims may have no realistic basis – since historically and politically the Tamils of Sri Lanka do not identify themselves with the Tamils of India – they nevertheless subtly legitimise the Sinhalese fear of Tamil domination. To paraphrase this, if rather crudely, it is as if the historian is saying, 'I do not completely agree with these fears but I can appreciate the perspective of the Sinhalese.'

A similar dynamic is evident in Bandaranaike's legislative speech made in favour of Sinhala-only in 1956. The arguments are similar to the those in his 1955 speech:

They [the Sinhala people] felt that as the Tamil language was spoken by so many millions in other countries, and possessed a much wider literature, and as the Tamil-speaking people had every means of propagating their literature and culture, it would have an advantage over Sinhalese which was spoken only by a few million people in this country ...

These were all factors that created the feeling that whereas the Tamil language did not run any real risk of disappearance, although given a position of parity, the Sinhalese language in fact did. People may or may not agree with that point of view, but at least take this as fact, that the vast majority of the Sinhalese felt that way very strongly. That at least is a fact. Whether you consider them to have been absolutely justified is another question.

(Bandaranaike 1963, 418–19)

Though one may be cautious about reading too much into it, the use of the third-person pronoun, ‘they’, is significant. Rhetorically, it places Bandaranaike at a distance from the Sinhala people on whose behalf he is speaking. This rhetorical distance also relates to the ideological distance at the end of the passage. Bandaranaike acknowledges that there is a Sinhala perception of a Tamil threat and that this perception is an important factor in giving credence to the Sinhalese refusal to grant the Tamil language equal status. Whether this threat has some factual basis is something that Bandaranaike leaves for the listener to decide. This kind of distance between Bandaranaike and the popular demand for Sinhala Only was also visible historically.

This distancing strategy renders the credibility of Bandaranaike’s argument problematic. He is advocating the implementation of a policy that would alienate a large portion of the population simply on the basis of a perception. Conversely, had Bandaranaike closely identified with the Sinhala position, his policy justification could have been potentially stronger. But such identification would have positioned him as accepting ‘parochial’ and ‘irrational’ fears, which would have been inconsistent with the kind of liberal and rational public image he sought to cultivate. James Manor’s (1989) political biography presents Bandaranaike as a liberal with a utopian life vision who for reasons of political expediency capitulated to majoritarian demands. As Sankaran Krishna (1999) argues, this disjuncture between a liberal, cosmopolitan self-identity and a public-political role that promotes exclusive majoritarian ideals is common to many Sri Lankan as well as South Asian political leaders. Krishna suggests this could be understood in terms of the ways the post-colonial nation views the state apparatus as an instrument to be used to redress injustices of colonialism. Within the historical imaginary that runs through Bandaranaike’s thinking, and Sinhala nationalism in general, the precolonial nation is understood to be a Sinhala one. Thus the injustices of colonialism were visited upon a Sinhala nation and

decolonisation needs to address Sinhala grievances. The interests of other communities remain peripheral.

Bandaranaike's liberal elitist nationalism also underscores the protean nature of nationalist discourse. While Bandaranaike's adoption of national dress, Buddhism and using the Sinhala language in public oratory point to his attempts to authenticate himself, his engagement with the discourse of authenticity appears to have been superficial. For instance, to the extent to which Bandaranaike was affectively connected to mid twentieth-century social and cultural trends relating to the Sinhala language is unclear in his writing. There is no reference to the thought of Munidasa Cumaratunga, who led the *hela* (indigenous) movement advocating an extreme form of language loyalty which sought to purify the Sinhala language of all foreign influences, including those of Sanskrit (Coperahewa 2011). In its early phase in the 1930s the movement's emphasis was largely linguistic, but from the late 1930s until Cumaratunga's death in 1944 *hela* became an ethno-linguistic discourse that advocated an autochthonous theory of Sinhala origin, which contrasted with the popular allochthonous theory that traces the Sinhala race to North India and the arrival of Vijaya (Coperahewa 2011, 7). Cumaratunga played a key role in making language a central concern in Sinhala nationalist thinking. The absence of Cumaratunga from Bandaranaike's thinking is curious. When Bandaranaike formed the *Sinhala Maha Sabha* in 1936 he wanted to change the name to *Swadesiya Maha Sabha* (Great Association of the Indigenes) to gain the support of non-Sinhala communities but Cumaratunga defeated this motion (Coperahewa 2012: 31). Bandaranaike was therefore clearly aware of Cumaratunga and his linguistic politics but does not seem to have seriously engaged with them. This is suggestive of the incongruity in the ways that members of the elite like Bandaranaike exploited discourses they felt had popular currency and political legitimacy but did not relate to these discourses affectively or engage with them substantively.

Conclusion

Bandaranaike's unresolved turn to authenticity reflects a larger dilemma in elite political culture in modern Sri Lanka. Early in his political career he sought authenticity by claiming racial coequality with the British upper classes. Subsequently the focus shifted to a kind of Gandhian organicity and critique of modernity. In Buddhism, Bandaranaike seems to combine

the two – in a discourse that provides anchorage in a sense of hoary authenticity but at the same time accesses a rationalist, modern outlook. In backing the discriminatory Sinhala language policy, he appears unconvinced by the Sinhala narrative of beleaguerment but nevertheless supports it for political gain. Faced with the necessity to engage in mass-based politics in a decolonising context, elite Sinhala politicians turned to what they saw as a common cultural heritage they shared with the people. In essence this was an idealised vision of culture fashioned in the nexus between colonial knowledge production and its appropriation by nationalist thinkers. The movement towards authenticity also remains, as in the *perahera* short story and its protagonist's removal of his shirt, at the level of a change in external markers. One could, if somewhat unkindly, argue that Bandaranaike adopted native dress but cognitively and affectively remained anglophile – albeit inflected by a sense of cosmopolitan decolonisation.

It is, ironically, as part of the idea of a transcendental Sinhala collective consciousness that Bandaranaike the postcolonial martyr becomes important to later developments in Sinhala nationalist discourse. As we shall see in the [next chapter](#), Gunadasa Amarasekara – one of the intellectual architects of possibly the most effective and intellectually rigorous expression of Sinhala nationalist thinking, the *Jathika Chintanaya* movement (loosely translating as 'National Consciousness/Philosophy') – argues that Bandaranaike instinctively tapped into a millennia-old Sinhala Buddhist consciousness (Amarasekara 1980). Amarasekara makes this claim as part of a grand teleology of postcolonial Sinhala nationalist revival in which Anagarika Dharmapala is the founding father figure and Bandaranaike his successor.

There is irony in Amarasekara's attempt to show Bandaranaike, who struggled to fashion a notion of authenticity, tapping into an organic sense of the authentic. This irony is intrinsic to the reality of the postcolonial afterlife of authenticity. Sinhala nationalism, like other nationalisms based on a precolonial cultural imaginary, such as *Hindutva* in India, is a prisoner to this imagination. This story of the constant shaping and reshaping of authenticity points to an intimate relationship between nationalism and the notion of authenticity. Although it is easy to argue that Bandaranaike 'used' or 'exploited' authenticity, what is clear is that he was shaped and dominated by this discourse as well. The persistence and influence of this discourse as a structural feature of Sinhala cultural and political discourse become more clearly apparent in Amarasekara's writing, where authenticity is an overarching concern that shapes his aesthetic and political imagination.

5

Gunadasa Amarasekara: the life and death of authentic things

Introduction

The layout of an ancient Sinhala kingdom came to Piyadasa's mind as he walked along the lake bund in the dusk. Wasn't that layout still well preserved here? On one side the lake bordered by the distant hills. On the other side the large paddy fields fed by the waters of the lake. The blue green of these paddies stretched as far as the eye could see. Houses were located in little islands amidst the paddies. All of this dominated by the massive stupa that rose embracing the sky.

(Amarasekara 1992, 19)

These thoughts occur to Piyadasa, an educated rural Sinhala youth, who is the main character of one of Gunadasa Amarasekara's novels, *Inimage Ihalata* (Up the Ladder) (1992). It invokes both an aesthetic and political imagination that took shape in the late 1950s and informed many aspects of Sinhala social and political life well into the 1980s. It draws upon but also reconfigures an immanent structure of feeling that has characterised the Sinhala nationalist imagination for well over a century and has shaped significant aspects of Sinhala social and political life, including state policies on economics, development and culture. The essence of Sinhala identity in this thinking lies in the village – in its organicity and in the morality represented by its people; at the same time, the imprint of a grander civilizational legacy from the past can be traced in the village. This is also a discourse deeply intertwined with the notion of *apekama*, the idea of an essential Sinhalaness, or authenticity, which can be traced as an unbroken narrative over a 2,500-year history.

In Gunadasa Amarasekara's writing the idea of Sinhala authenticity plays a foundational role. For Amarasekara authenticity is both an aesthetic and political category, and the aesthetics of authenticity are inseparable from its politics. What we saw in Dharmapala and Bandaranaike as a scattered discourse of authenticity, constantly shifting between the universal and the particular, the personal and the political, and the historical and the contemporary, becomes a more clearly articulated and defined postcolonial politics of authenticity. As we shall see, the historical moment Amarasekara occupies is also central to the emergence of authenticity as a foundational category. In the decades following the 1950s the institutionalisation of Sinhala nationalism gained rapid momentum and Amarasekara's writing is a cultural barometer of Sinhala nationalism's postcolonial vicissitudes. But his writing is not just a reflection of Sinhala nationalism. It also seeks to directly intervene in and shape the historical destiny of a nation. It begins with postcolonial euphoria and a vision for building an 'authentic' Sinhala nation. In the 1980s disillusionment sets in, signalling what I identify as a crisis of authenticity. Amarasekara's career marks the crystallisation and high point of authenticity as a cultural and political discourse, but it then witnesses authenticity's decline and death.

Amarasekara's early career and the politics of Sinhala cultural nationalism

Gunadasa Amarasekara was born in 1929 in Yatalamatta in the southern district of Galle about 72 miles south of Colombo, an area often referred to as the 'deep south' in political discourse, and one that served as a locus of post-independence Sinhala nationalism (Orjuela 2009, 151). He was educated at Mahinda College in Galle and later at Nalanda College in Colombo – both schools associated with Buddhist middle-class education and the legacies of the Buddhist revival. He later entered the University of Peradeniya to study dentistry. He became a dental surgeon and spent some time in England doing postgraduate work. During his time at Peradeniya, Amarasekara emerged as a leading voice in Sinhala poetry and prose and was closely associated with Ediriweera Sarachchandra (1914–96), a pioneering post-independence Sinhala intellectual, literary critic, writer and dramatist. Later Amarasekara was also influenced by Martin Wickramasinghe (1890–1976), one of the most prolific and significant mid twentieth-century Sinhala writers, who is credited with establishing the novel as a major prose genre in Sinhala.

While continuing to practise as a dental surgeon, Amarasekara became the most prominent and prolific Sinhala writer since Martin Wickramasinghe, and he continues to write today. In the early 1970s Amarasekara also increasingly began to produce socio-political criticism. Along with Nalin de Silva, a physicist and university academic with a leftist history, he began the *Jathika Chintanaya* movement, which can be considered one of the most intellectually rigorous expressions of Sinhala nationalism (Dewasiri 2010). Currently Amarasekara is the President of the National Patriotic Movement, a loosely structured body of professionals, intellectuals and artists who are against constitutional reform and the devolution of power and are deeply suspicious of discourses that advocate minority and human rights (Fernando 2008, 116).

In his early career as a writer at Peradeniya, Amarasekara was identified with the 'Peradeniya School' – a literary movement that took as its inspiration the aesthetic ideology of Ediriweera Sarachchandra, who advocated a modernist approach to literature and encouraged Sinhala writers to experiment with form and content (Dissanayake 2005; Sarachchandra 2008 [1959]). In his own aesthetic practice Sarachchandra adapted and borrowed widely from a range of sources such as classical Greek drama, the conventions of European proscenium theatre, the *noh* and *kabuki* traditions and Sinhala folk dramatic traditions. *Maname*, produced in 1956, inaugurated a new postcolonial dramatic form and is considered a landmark in modern Sinhala theatre (Gunawardana 2000). Amarasekara's formative years at Peradeniya therefore mark a period of intense Sinhala cultural activity, where in a number of domains, such as prose, poetry, art, film and song, Sinhala artists were experimenting with content and form in order to produce a modern Sinhala aesthetic. The focus of most of this activity was the revival and modernisation of *desheeya* (indigenous) art and culture (Dharmasiri 2014) and was not overtly Sinhala nationalist in a political sense. However, these aesthetic and cultural activities had important implications for the institutionalisation of Sinhala nationalism and the spread of Sinhala nationalist thinking as a structure of feeling.

Amarasekara's early writing reflected the general trends of the Peradeniya School. One of his earliest novels, *Karumakkarayo* (The Fateful Ones) (1955), is a dystopian narrative of a Sinhala village family that disintegrates amidst incest, social stigma and the self-centred exploitation of a dysfunctional father figure. The novel's themes include rural Sinhala subjectivity buffeted by poverty, a rural economy impoverished by the plantation economy, and conservative attitudes to sexuality that conflict with youthful desire and the influence of urban modernity.

There is little redemptive in the way *Karumakkarayo* imagines the village or the individuals who people its social landscape. A similar dystopian vision can be found in *Yali Upannemi* (I Am Reborn) (1960), a story about a man who marries a prostitute to sublimate his oedipal desire for the mother. Both texts demonstrate a strong modernist influence in their exploration of sexuality and the inner subjectivities of their characters.

The nationalist turn in Amarasekara, Martin Wickramasinghe and the village

In the early 1960s Amarasekara broke away from the Peradeniya School – a break that marks an explicit ‘nationalist turn’ in his writing. The conditions under which this turn occurred speak to the politics of authenticity in independent Sri Lanka. One of the key influences in Amarasekara’s turn was Martin Wickramasinghe, who was central to the cultural articulation of an authentic imaginary in Sinhala literature from the 1940s to the early 1970s. Wickramasinghe is often considered Sri Lanka’s first truly ‘modern’ novelist (Amarakeerthi 2012). A literary polymath who was largely self-taught and educated, Wickramasinghe was a prolific writer and also a canny businessman who accumulated substantial wealth through his writing and publishing.

Wickramasinghe’s *Gamperaliya* (Uprooted) (1981 [1941]) is considered a masterpiece in the modern Sinhala literary tradition. It contains thematic concerns that pan out in different forms throughout the author’s literary career and cast a long and influential shadow upon Amarasekara and several generations of Sinhala writers. *Gamperaliya* is a novel about social change and the challenges faced by Sinhala subjectivity within the social and cultural changes wrought by colonial modernity, urbanisation and merchant capitalism. The protagonist of the novel, Piyal, a man from a rural lower middle-class background, migrates to the city, reinvents himself as a successful businessman and then returns to his village to challenge the declining rural feudal aristocracy. Although the novel depicts social change as inevitable, there is a sense of romantic nostalgia for the rural feudal order and the organicity that it represents.

Gamperaliya sets up a structural relationship between the country and city (Williams 1973), the rural being invested with a sense of organic authenticity. There was overlap between this imaginary and the political mobilisation of authenticity for developmental work in independent Sri Lanka – with the village in particular seen as a repository of Sinhala authenticity. The notion of village-based authenticity was

something Wickramasinghe kept returning to throughout his career. After *Gamperaliya*, he wrote *Kaliyugaya* (Age of Kali) (2001 [1957]) and *Yuganthaya* (End of an Era) (1965 [1949]). These novels form a three-part saga in which Sinhala society is depicted as becoming increasingly unmoored from traditional village life.

Anthropologists such as Jonathan Spencer (1990) and Stanley Tambiah (1992) have also argued that Wickramasinghe's writing was instrumental in the popular dissemination of the symbolic triad of the Sinhala cultural imagination of the *weva* (tank or lake), *dagoba* (Buddhist stupa) and *yaya* (paddy field) – three symbols that hark back to glorious Sinhala kingdoms of the past. However, Wickramasinghe's articulation of the village is not a simplistic romanticisation. It was an attempt to negotiate a sense of postcolonial identity which can reconcile modernity and tradition, much like in the work of R. K. Narayan in India, whose fictional Malgudi appears on the surface to be a simplistic and timeless pastoral village but in fact exhibits a complex negotiation between modernity, tradition and postcolonial identity.

One of Wickramasinghe's early semi-autobiographical works, *Kalu Nika Seveema* (In Search of the Kalu Nika) (1989 [1951]), begins with an account of the author's village, Koggala, in the south of the country. The narrative trope is that of an adult Wickramasinghe returning to the village of his childhood and rediscovering a pastoral ideal of village life, which he sees as sexually and morally liberating because the villagers seem unencumbered by bourgeois values; this contrasts with his current fallen educated middle-class self. The *kalu nika* of the title refers to an extremely rare plant that is virtually impossible to find and thus signals an introspective journey into something indefinable and intangible. This intangibility is found throughout the text in the form of pathos about a way of life that is no longer readily available. The village Wickramasinghe returns to is one heavily reshaped by British occupation during the Second World War, since the British maintained a large air-base in Koggala. At the beginning of the story Wickramasinghe literally peels away these external layers to enter the heart of Koggala, which he knew in childhood and in which he locates a sense of rustic simplicity unencumbered by the burdens of civilisation. These themes recur in his writing, as in *Sinhala Lakuna* (Sinhala Identity) (1995 [1947]) and *Upan Da Sita* (From the Day I Was Born) (1961).

Amarasekara's turn from his avant-garde beginnings to a more conventional trajectory was in part prompted by public criticism of

his work by Wickramasinghe (Dissanayake 2005). In the early 1960s Wickramasinghe accused Amarasekara of distorting Sinhala culture, particularly its village-based rural ethos. Amarasekara then abandoned his 'radical' trajectory. It is, however, a stretch to argue that Wickramasinghe's influence alone turned Amarasekara. It is more useful to characterise this turn as one in which Amarasekara submits to a larger nationalist cultural project. Such an understanding is supported by the aesthetics of decolonisation elsewhere – for instance, the ways that African writers saw a distinct political role for the writer.

An indication of how Amarasekara came to conceive his role as writer is evident in a seven-part series of novels he wrote beginning with *Gamanaka Mula* (The Beginning of a Journey) (1984). These works form an epic story of the Sinhala middle class, which is similar in some ways to Wickramasinghe's trilogy of the 1960s but with a trajectory that shows the Sinhala middle class losing contact with its rural ethos and then gradually rediscovering it. In essence this epic narrative is an indication that Amarasekara sees himself in the role of a didactic national allegorist or, as Achebe put it, 'The Novelist as Teacher' (1990 [1965]).

Along with his nationalist turn Amarasekara also began to write cultural criticism, where his socio-political vision and the role of the writer are articulated explicitly. In two texts – *Abuddassa Yugayak* (A Topsy-Turvy Time) (1976) and *Anagarika Dharmapala Maaksvaadeeda?* (Is Anagarika Dharmapala Marxist?) (1980) – Amarasekara attempts to construct a grand socio-political narrative of Sinhala identity and its historical evolution. Both texts argue that, despite numerous invasions and centuries of colonial occupation, an essential idea of Sinhala-ness survives. The task of postcolonial politicians and the intelligentsia is to discover this essence and rearticulate it in the contemporary context. As we shall see, it is in these two texts that Dharmapala and Bandaranaike emerge as key figures in Amarasekara's postcolonial narrative of Sinhala revival and resurgence. But this turn to authenticity is never complete. In all of Amarasekara's texts the very insistence on authenticity belies an insecurity that demonstrates that Sinhala authenticity cannot be taken for granted. There is an ongoing tension between authenticity as ontological fact and its reality as a constructed narrative. Some critics have argued that this obsessive concern with Sinhala authenticity has made Amarasekara's writing predictable and didactic, Amarasekara the 'ideologue' often overshadowing Amarasekara the 'novelist' (Amarakeerthi 2009).

Tradition, Buddhism and Marxism: *Anagarika Dharmapala Maaksvaadeeda?*

Part polemic, part socio-cultural criticism, *Anagarika Dharmapala Maaksvaadeeda?* (1980) maps out the ideological terrain on which Amarasekara constructs his teleological narrative of postcolonial Sinhala nationalist resurgence. This text, like its predecessor *Abuddasa Yugayak* (1976), came in the aftermath of a number of important socio-political changes. Though Bandaranaike's victory in 1956 was popularly seen as a victory of ordinary Sinhala people led by the 'intermediary elite' – sometimes referred to as the *pancha maha balawegaya* (five great forces) (Hennayake 2006, 84), or *sangha, govi, weda, guru, kamkaru* (the Buddhist *sangha*, farmers, indigenous doctors, teachers and workers) – there was discontent among many Sinhala and Buddhist groups that the pace and depth of change were insufficient (Manor 1989, 263–4). Following Bandaranaike's assassination in 1959, power in the country mainly remained with the party Bandaranaike had founded, the SLFP. His widow Sirimavo Bandaranaike emerged as a powerful successor and the world's first woman prime minister from 1960 to 1965. After an election defeat in 1965, she again regained power in 1970 and was prime minister till 1977 (de Silva 1981, 526–7). Mrs Bandaranaike was seen as more unapologetically Sinhala nationalist than her late husband (de Silva Wijeyratne 2014, 137–8) and it was under her premiership that the 1972 Republican Constitution was drafted and enacted, giving Buddhism pride of place. This move appalled many progressive forces in the country because it was seen as a betrayal of the secular principles of the left and also because the *Lanka Sama Samaja Party* (Lanka Equal Society Party), one of Sri Lanka's oldest leftist parties, was a major coalition partner of Mrs Bandaranaike's government, and one of the major figures of the 'old left', Colvin R. de Silva, was directly involved in drafting the new constitution (Wickramasinghe 2006, 183).

Although the post-Bandaranaike era can be seen as one of political institutionalisation of Sinhala nationalism, economically the promise of decolonisation had hardly materialised and there was frustration particularly among educated rural youth (de Silva 1981, 504–5). Parallel to the economic stagnation of the country was an emergent schism within the left movement: the old left and the established political elite were seen as a comprador class by vernacular educated rural youth who entered the political process in the decades after 1956 – sometimes referred to as the 'children of '56' (de Silva 2005; Wickramasinghe 2006, 230–7). In this context the radical 'new left' emerged in the form of the

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) (People's Liberation Front), led by the charismatic Rohana Wijeweera, a rural Sinhala youth from southern Sri Lanka who had attended the Patrice Lumumba University in Soviet Russia. The JVP built a highly effective village-level network, used a system called the *panthi paha* (five classes) for ideological indoctrination (Dewasiri 2010) and positioned itself explicitly as a radical alternative to the old left. In 1971 the JVP launched a failed military coup to capture state power and was bloodily suppressed in a brutal crackdown by Mrs Bandaranaike's government (Wickramasinghe 2006, 237).

Both *Abuddassa Yugayak* (1976) and *Anagarika Dharmapala Maaksvaadeeda?* (1980) were significantly shaped by this political context. *Anagarika Dharmapala Maaksvaadeeda?*, the text I shall consider in detail, can be seen as implicitly addressing the JVP. Amarasekara appears to be recognising the JVP as a radical progressive force in Sinhala society and inviting them to join history – history as a teleological narrative whose end point is the realisation of a Sinhala Buddhist state. The text explores the possibilities of bringing into dialogue a Buddhist vision of a righteous society and a Marxist vision of an egalitarian social order. Both Dharmapala and Bandaranaike are forerunners to this project because Amarasekara constructs them as figures who intuitively grasped the Sinhala Buddhist heritage of the nation and attempted to actualise it as a socio-political reality. For Amarasekara they were unable to define and articulate clearly the historical and intellectual framework in which tradition and modern reality can enter into negotiation, and so their versions of this national project are seen as only partially realised. In presenting this hypothesis, Amarasekara reinterprets the Sri Lankan past, 'rescuing' it, as it were, from perceived distortions in academic scholarship.

The 'historical' argument of *Anagarika Dharmapala Maaksvaadeeda?* may be summarised in the following way. A majority of Sri Lankan historians have failed to realise the importance of Dharmapala's significance in the country's history. Dharmapala is the single figure who recognised the potential of drawing upon a precolonial Buddhist concept of governance and sought to actualise it as an anti-colonial strategy. However, Dharmapala's legacy was soon appropriated by a comprador class who negated its radical potential and used it for their own ends. Nonetheless, this Sinhala Buddhist imaginary remained a subversive force among the rural middle-class intelligentsia consisting of indigenous doctors, vernacular schoolteachers and Buddhist priests – in essence the *panch maha balawegaya*. They emerged as a political movement in 1956 through Bandaranaike's victory. However, as in Dharmapala's time, the

1956 victory also failed to realise its radical potential because it was appropriated by comprador interests.

Amarasekara further argues that historians, sociologists and anthropologists have failed to realise the importance of this grassroots Sinhala Buddhist movement because of their limited understanding of both the contemporary and precolonial history of the country. In contemporary history they tend to equate nationalism to the politics of an elite comprador class. In precolonial history they fail to see the continued existence of a Buddhist form of governance inherited from ancient India. This failure arises because Buddhism is interpreted by many contemporary sociologists and anthropologists as an individualistic religion without a socio-political function. Such a perception is an ahistorical understanding of the religion. Amarasekara argues that Buddhism has had a socio-political function in both India and Sri Lanka and that this legacy has remained with the Sinhala people despite colonial influence. The text ends by positing the idea that the crucial intellectual and social challenge that confronts contemporary Sinhala society is to create an egalitarian society by combining Marxism's revolutionary potential and Buddhism's ethical social vision.

The idea of a Sinhala Buddhist subaltern movement

Amarasekara's historical narrative can be readily critiqued for its lack of historicity. It homogenises precolonial Sri Lankan society and erases the diverse socio-political forces that shaped the colonial and post-colonial periods of the country – most importantly the multiplicity of ethno-cultural identities. One of the strategies used in Amarasekara's text to make this hypothesis appear credible is to argue that most post-independence historians are unable to account for the emergence of Sinhala nationalism as a political force in 1956 and that this is in turn owes to their inability to understand the historical continuity of Sinhala nationalist thinking.

The main reason why those referred to above [pro-colonial historians and Marxist academics] are unable to understand the revolution that happened in 1956 is the ahistorical conclusion that it was a random and sudden occurrence ...

What happened in 1956 is not the sudden emergence of a minor political movement that engulfed a major one. It was the entry, into the political arena, of a current that gradually grew amidst the masses of the country and swept away all minor

currents that existed up to that time. This major current is none other than the struggle for anti-colonial national resurgence that emerged from the time that this country came under British colonial rule. This current – which entered the political arena in '56 and bewildered the colonialists of this country, worshippers of English and the Marxists – was brought to its highest pitch at the beginning of this century by Anagarika Dharmapala. This struggle, which was faltering at the beginning of the century, was completely revitalised by Dharmapala. He saw that such a national revitalisation programme allied to an anti-colonial struggle could be successfully mobilised in this country. He saw that, though a defeated race for centuries, the cultural basis for such a struggle was alive in this country. Dharmapala saw that the farmers, labourers, [indigenous] doctors, [vernacular] teachers and priests were all linked through a common cultural framework. Thus when Dharmapala toured the villages of this country and raised the anti-colonial cry – Sinhalese wake up, save Buddhism – the farmers, priests, doctors, teachers and other groups who lived in the villages of this country listened to it as one ... The idea of a 'major current' expressed by Dr. Mendis [a Sri Lankan academic historian of the mid twentieth century] is promoted by the comprador class of this country to negate this mass anti-colonial movement. Though the comprador class considered it a 'major current' the masses of this country did not consider it their legacy. In a very short period of time the masses saw the false nature of this 'major current' and turned towards the original anti-colonial movement. Bandaranaike grasped this reality intuitively. He realised that all he needed to do was to allow this movement to enter into the political arena ...

It is the existence, to some degree, of comprador thinking that has prevented our historians, intellectuals and Marxists from seeing this reality underlying '56. The same thinking operates subtly and unconsciously even in the Marxist who overtly challenges colonialism.

(Amarasekara 1980, 9–11)

The overall impression this passage gives is of a polemical argument that uses sweeping generalisations to promote its vision of Sri Lankan history and politics. However, the idea that a subaltern Sinhala Buddhist movement existed throughout the British colonial period and emerged as a political force in 1956 is made within a frame that it is ahistorical to view 1956 as a sudden and random occurrence. Amarasekara's argument

implies that the historiography of G. C. Mendis is symptomatic of a larger problem in Sri Lankan historiography – the lack of a subaltern focus. The specific lacuna identified by Amarasekara is Mendis’s inability to move beyond an elite-biased outlook and grant agency to the subaltern masses of the country.

There is no great difference between a historian and a person in Colombo whose awareness of this country is limited to English newspapers which promote the idea that Bandaranaike attired in native dress and promising Sinhala Only in twenty four hours deluded the priests, indigenous doctors and vernacular teachers of this country and came to power. Both these individuals sub-consciously believe that the Sinhalese villager of this country is an uncivilised dupe.

(Amarasekara 1980, 9)

Though the account claims to be historically specific to Sri Lanka, Marxism speaks through it at many points. In specifically targeting an urban and Western (English)-educated elite, the class struggle dimension of Amarasekara’s text is reproduced in classic terms as country versus city, the individual (*a* historian and *a* person in Colombo) versus the collective. The urban elite is an aggregate of individuals, unlike rural society, which is made up of all classes, from religious figures to indigenous and organic intellectuals to the ordinary ‘Sinhalese villager’.

Though somewhat simplistically expressed, Amarasekara’s critique does carry some validity in relation to Mendis’s historiography. The Mendis text referred to here is *Ceylon Today and Yesterday: Main Currents of Ceylon History* (1963 [1957]). Writing in the immediate aftermath of the events of 1956, Mendis sees the rise of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism as a dead end, a regressive throwback to communalism. He holds to the progressivism inherent in colonial narratives about the modernisation of Sri Lanka and sees the future as one that should be firmly embedded within the secular modernising zeal expressed in various institutional reforms carried out by the colonial administration, most prominently the Colebrooke–Cameron reforms of 1833.

Colebrooke, after a study of two years, made a thorough analysis of the political, social and economic conditions of the Island and came to the conclusion that the river of life in Ceylon was practically stagnant ... He searched for the causes that obstructed this flow, and came to the conclusion that it was not British rule

but the continuity of the ancient system. Therefore, he made recommendations to liberate Ceylon from the burden of its past heritage.

(Mendis 1963 [1957], 139)

Amarasekara's critique was written almost two decades after Mendis's work, and Sri Lankan historiography by this time had looked at the events of 1956 differently. This is something that Amarasekara acknowledges by referencing the work of R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, who represents a later generation of historians. Amarasekara suggests that Gunawardana's work has been able to overcome the common view that 1956 represents the 'victory of a nationalist capitalist class' (Amarasekara 1980, 8) and shows how Bandaranaike's coalition won because it was able to secure the support of important rural Sinhala Buddhist groups. Nonetheless, Amarasekara perceives an essential commonality between Gunawardana and the historiography represented by Mendis because of its inability to trace a genealogy for what happened in 1956. This limitation, Amarasekara suggests, emerges from Gunawardana's failure, as with Mendis, to identify the historical emergence of a common Sinhala Buddhist cultural framework that animated a subaltern anti-colonial movement.

Amarasekara's argument can be placed in the wider context of the general lack of historical scholarship on subaltern movements in Sri Lanka. As Jonathan Spencer (1990, 217) observes, scholarship has had difficulty accounting for what Spencer calls the 'temporal lag in the development of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism' – or why the well-documented Sinhala and Buddhist cultural and nascent-nationalist resurgence in the late nineteenth century (Malalgoda 1976; Obeyesekere 1976; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988) took almost a decade after formal independence in 1948 to achieve political expression. Spencer suggests this is possibly because scholarly historical sources have tended to be urban, English, Colombo-centric ones. Thus, the implicit void both Spencer and Amarasekara point towards is the lack of a subaltern focus in the historiography of Sri Lanka. Twentieth-century Sri Lankan historiography – especially in chronicling nationalism – has tended to focus on the largely visible and well-documented political movements represented by the national elite.

Amarasekara's critique of Sri Lankan historiography should be seen as a political rather than scholarly exercise. The narrative of an organic cultural consciousness that bonded different Sinhala social groups together, one could suggest, is not very different from the familiar idea

of a national cultural consciousness that was used by elite nationalism in general – and by figures like Dharmapala and Bandaranaike (Moore 1985; Rogers 1997). The vision I have explored in the previous chapters shaped Dharmapala’s and Bandaranaike’s characteristically tutelary or custodial attitudes towards subaltern groups. This is evident in Amarasekara’s text when he attempts to rationalise Dharmapala’s use of vitriolic language when he addressed peasantry:

If one reads Dharmapala’s writing uncritically it is not surprising that someone would form the impression that he was a religious zealot. Yet we must remember that this zealotry was something Dharmapala deliberately invokes. These articles called ‘facts people should know’ were written for an uneducated rural Buddhists. In a manner they would understand.

(Amarasekara 1980, 17)

Though Amarasekara criticises academic historiography for not granting agency to the Sinhala villager, this passage reveals a remarkably similar attitude. The passage suggests that both Dharmapala and Amarasekara consider the rural populace to be unable to deal with complexity. They need to be addressed in a simplified polemical language because of their lack of education. Despite positioning itself as a critical intervention in nationalist discourse, Amarasekara’s text replicates some of the very perceptions and attitudes it seeks to resist.

The story that Amarasekara builds fits a familiar pattern of authenticity. For both Dharmapala and Bandaranaike authenticity was not something readily available. They had to find it outside themselves. Similarly, for Amarasekara authenticity is something located in Buddhism, the village or the peasantry. This is a pattern visible in Sinhala intellectuals with rural origins who have migrated to the city but look back at the rural as a site of authenticity; the same vision is visible in Martin Wickramasinghe. Just as elite politicians like Bandaranaike sought to claim moral legitimacy by projecting an idea of authenticity, Amarasekara as a Sinhala-educated intellectual is attempting to claim greater knowledge of authenticity by virtue of his understanding Buddhism, the village and the peasantry. Wickramasinghe made similar claims immediately after the 1956 electoral victory when he wrote an essay called *Bamunu Kulaye Bindaweteema* (The Downfall of the Brahministic Class) (1956), which argued that 1956 marked the political displacement of a comprador class. One may usefully invoke here the metaphor of a series of historical escalators that Raymond Williams

uses in *The Country and the City* (1973): how successive generations of English writers have looked back to other times and places that were more authentic than their own.

The idea of a Buddhist state and Sri Lanka's precolonial history

Amarasekara makes procedurally similar arguments to those above: that scholarship has failed to recognise the role Buddhism played in the socio-political life of the nation in precolonial Sri Lanka. Although he challenges how Buddhism has been defined and interpreted by scholars, the alternative he proposes is a homogenising ahistorical vision that rationalises the idea of contemporary Sinhala Buddhist hegemony. Central to Amarasekara's seamless narrative is the idea of a Buddhist socio-political system that always existed in Sri Lanka in antiquity. Establishing this idea as historical fact is important for Amarasekara's argument. It allows him to defend Dharmapala against criticism of romanticising the past. It also allows him to argue that such a socio-political structure is practical in the present because it is based on a 'realistic' understanding of what has happened in history.

A system of governance accepted and protected by people over thousands of years cannot be just erased. It is an eternal legacy of ours. If this legacy in some way shapes our understanding of the present it is equally relevant to how we construct our future. In short, there is no present or future that can be constructed by forgetting the past. Thus, Dharmapala's exhortation that a Buddhist kingdom should be created in this country needs to be regarded as rational and realistic, and made with a proper historical consciousness. It was a project based on a correct perception of our history and of Buddhism.

(Amarasekara 1980, 38)

The argument made here is that consciousness of an indigenous form of governance remains in the collective memory of the Sinhala people and that they recognise it as part of their heritage. In order to make this argument, Amarasekara first challenges the idea, which became widespread in nineteenth-century global intellectual circles, that Buddhism is an individualistic religion. Amarasekara engages critically with this idea because it can be used to negate the socio-political function of Buddhism

and to suggest that 'political Buddhism' is a contradiction of the religion's ethical principles.

Charles Hallisey (1995) has explored how nineteenth-century positivist European Buddhist scholars tended to abstract a text-based understanding of doctrine from popular practice, constructing the former as more original and authoritative than the latter. Ananda Abeysekara (2002) has suggested that this nineteenth-century framework of knowledge has influenced prominent contemporary scholars of Buddhism like Stanley Tambiah, Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere. Abeysekara (2002, 30–40) argues that the work of these scholars also reproduces a dichotomy between the idea of doctrinally accurate original Buddhism and impure versions of the religion that are practised by various societies. This dichotomy can be utilised as an ethical critique against what is seen as the political exploitation and manipulation of the religion. However, as Abeysekara (2002, 37) points out, the idea of an authentic Buddhism can create a conceptual reification. He suggests that Buddhism needs to be viewed as a discursive construct that has historically and contextually contingent multiple meanings. Amarasekara's critique of the 'individualistic' hypothesis of Buddhism can be placed within this larger conceptual debate:

It is important to consider how the view held by many sociologists in this country that Buddhism is an 'individual path for spiritual salvation' or an 'individualistic religion' was formed. I believe the origin of this view is the social scientist Max Weber. There is no doubt that Max Weber was an important social scientist who lived during the first half of this century. We have to accept without reservation that insights expressed by him regarding Indian religious thinking are very important. But his views on Buddhism were expressed without knowledge of the origins of Buddhism or its core teachings. This is because he lumped Buddhism with other Indian religions like Hinduism. He viewed all these religions as concerned with individual spiritual salvation. Buddhism was considered similarly.

There is no doubt that the thinking of our social scientists is heavily influenced by Max Weber's misconceptions. But what is surprising is how they uncritically reproduce these ideas when they have knowledge gained through the practical experience of Buddhism ...

It is not through the study of ancient Pali texts from within the perspectives of another culture that the real doctrine the Buddha preached could be comprehended. It is from a different approach.

That is, by considering the social milieu in which Buddhism emerged and grew and by contextualising the religion within this social milieu ... Western scholars have taken this approach only recently ... Trevor Ling's text *The Buddha* is one such attempt.

(Amarasekara 1980, 29–33)

Amarasekara critiques one homogenising scholarly approach, the idea that Buddhism is individualistic, only to supplant it with another. Though he seemingly opens up the space for a historicised and contextually sensitive understanding of Buddhism, this space is immediately filled with the scholarship of Trevor Ling, a scholar active in the 1960s and 1970s, which validates Amarasekara's view of a largely static precolonial Sri Lankan history (Ling 1973). Although Weber's position extracts the religion from its socio-historical context, Amarasekara re-embeds it within an idealised form of righteous Buddhist governance based on the Asokan Empire of ancient India.

The kingdom created by Emperor Asoka in India two and a half centuries after Buddha's *parinirvana* [passing away], we know, is the kind of governance system taught by the Buddha. But I believe that we have only a limited understanding that the foundation for a similar Buddhist kingdom was laid during the same time with the coming of Buddhism to this country.

(Amarasekara 1980, 36)

This is in essence a reinscription of the *Mahavamsa* narrative, which, as de Silva Wijeyratne (2007, 164) and other scholars like Bruce Kapferer (1988) and Steven Kemper (1991) have suggested, is used to legitimise the idea of an organic link between Buddhism, the Sinhala people and the land. This historical imaginary is apparent in *Anagarika Dharmapala Maaksvaadeeda?* But, seeking to establish the idea of a Buddhist form of governance as historical fact, Amarasekara – while referring to the mytho-history of the *Mahavamsa* – also attempts to anchor his views within the academic authority of Trevor Ling's scholarship. If the *Mahavamsa* narrative may be critiqued as myth, Ling's scholarship is positioned as an authoritative alternative: 'According to Trevor Ling we lost this Buddhist kingdom only after British colonisation' (Amarasekara 1980, 38). Amarasekara's selective appropriation of Western scholarship is also typical of Sinhala nationalism: scholarship and scholars seen as sympathetic to the Sinhala cause are invoked routinely, whereas others are dismissed as both ideologically and epistemologically faulty.

Reconciling Buddhism with Marxism

Anagarika Dharmapala Maaksvaadeeda? concludes with an exploration of how Marxist thinking can be brought into dialogue with Buddhism to create social change and establish a new social order. Marxism is posited as an important discourse in this social vision because of its revolutionary potential. Amarasekara's text sees such a revolutionary discourse as a vital component of modern social change because the socio-economic structure of Sri Lankan society has been radically altered by colonial influence. According to Amarasekara, Dharmapala's failure to understand this resulted in the appropriation of his nationalist project by comprador interests. This argument appears to contradict the argument Amarasekara has been building so far: that colonialism has caused no radical break in Sinhala society. Amarasekara qualifies his view of social change by suggesting that, though the economic and social structure was altered, the cultural consciousness retained an essential continuity. It is within this Marxist vision of a class-stratified society that Amarasekara suggests there is a need to reappropriate the legacy of Dharmapala by freeing it from comprador interests: 'there is only one way in which the appropriation of teachings meant for the benefit of the masses by a smaller class can be prevented. It is by exposing it as the ideology of a specific class' (Amarasekara 1980, 51).

Amarasekara's text therefore presents itself as a critical intervention that fuses the radical, revolutionary potential of Marxism with a specifically indigenous cultural imaginary. In doing so, it is attempting to address the question of how a European discourse of modernity, Marxism, can be integrated with the need for cultural self-definition and continuity which characterises decolonisation.

The main issue to resolve, as I have shown, is how to infuse Marxist thinking into our collective sensibility, which is formed by Buddhism. How can we achieve the coexistence of Buddhism and Marxism? How are we to move closer to this coexistence upon which our liberty depends? How are we to achieve this coexistence which will realise Dharmapala's wishes? The main question that confronts us today is this.

Searching for answers to this is not an easy task. This could become a new interpretation of Marxism ... This new interpretation need not be limited to us; it can become an interpretation

common to countries like India and Burma which are rich in philosophical tradition.

(Amarasekara 1980, 64)

One may suggest that this is perhaps the most 'progressive' element in Amarasekara's critique. Unlike most of the other claims he makes regarding authenticity, which are based on an essentialist and reductive anti-Western orientation, he sees Marxism as a progressive force for social justice. However, he did not retain this position for very long. From the mid 1980s, with the escalation of the violence between the Sri Lankan state and Tamil militants, Amarasekara became more explicitly nativist. As we shall see later, in the late 1980s Amarasekara's work turns inwards and exhibits a belief that all knowledge and all answers lie within an indigenous frame.

Inimage Ihalata: a fictional exploration of modern Sinhala Buddhist identity

Inimage Ihalata (Up the Ladder) (1992) occupies the mid-point in Amarasekara's seven-part saga on the emergence of the Sinhala middle class, beginning with *Gamanaka Mula* (1984). The text is significant because it illustrates the poetics of authenticity in Amarasekara and invokes many of the themes from his socio-political criticism. It also stages a fictionalised account of his nationalist turn and is an implicit recantation of views expressed in his earlier work. The title refers to the aspirations of the socially mobile rural Sinhala Buddhist middle class and the challenges it faces in a modernising society. The story loosely follows a Bildungsroman structure: the protagonist, Piyadasa – an educated and intellectually sensitive Sinhala Buddhist youth from a village in the south of the country – experiences cultural or moral dislocation as he negotiates university education and urban life. The narrative is located in three primary spaces – the village, the University of Peradeniya and the city of Colombo – the village figuring as a site of authenticity from which Piyadasa is initially unmoored and to which he eventually returns.

The village as the site of a traditional Sinhala Buddhist ethos

Inimage Ihalata begins with Piyadasa studying philosophy at the University of Peradeniya. Having failed to enter medical school, he sees his humanities degree as a means of social mobility because it will

enable him to sit the Civil Service examination. The story is set in the immediate aftermath of 1956 and Piyadasa's family is presented almost like a schematic representation of the 'intermediate elite' that enabled Bandaranaike's electoral victory. Piyadasa's mother is a Sinhala-language schoolteacher and his dead father was an *ayurvedic* (indigenous medicine) doctor. He has an educated but lazy elder brother and a sister who lacks ambition. The aspirations for upward social mobility in the family are therefore carried by Piyadasa, and his entire family depends on him for guidance. In the opening sequence the family has moved into a new house, and Piyadasa, on holiday from university, decides to visit the Kataragama Hindu shrine – a site of pilgrimage for Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and Christians – with Balamahattaya, his elderly and relatively uneducated cousin. This journey becomes a symbolically charged experience; its moments of departure and return signify Piyadasa's radical questioning of his rural cultural ethos and his subsequent and implicit reaffirmation of the rural as a site of authenticity.

The road trip to the Kataragama becomes a metaphorical journey into Sinhala civilisational history. Piyadasa's village is close to the southern coastal town of Galle and is therefore exposed to some urban influence. However, as he and Balamahattaya travel deeper into the south the scenery begins to change and a rural aesthetic appears in Piyadasa's perception of the landscape:

Just as the bus passed Unawatuna, Piyadasa was reminded of the description in Martin Wickramasinghe's *Gamperaliya*. How true was the description that the Galle–Matara highway is like a black ribbon strung across beautiful home gardens and coconut groves? What one gets here is not the gloomy depressing atmosphere between Colombo and Galle. The sights from both sides of the road thrill the mind and the body.

(Amarasekara 1992, 16)

The intertextual reference to Wickramasinghe indicates how Wickramasinghe's aesthetic and political imagination overshadows *Inimage Ihalata*. The urban–rural aesthetic maps on to an ideological urban–rural contrast in the novel, which becomes more sharply drawn later in the narrative. As Piyadasa and Balamahattaya approach Kataragama, their final destination, the historical imaginary of an ancient Buddhist civilisation that underwrites the rural as the repository of authentic Sinhala culture becomes explicit in the landscape: 'The layout of an ancient Sinhala kingdom came to Piyadasa's mind as he walked

along the lake bund in the dusk. Wasn't that layout still well preserved here?' (Amarasekara 1992, 19).

Piyadasa has these reflections while he walks along the lake bund at Tissamaharamaya with Balamahattaya. Tissamaharamaya is the final stop on their journey before they reach the pilgrimage site at Kataragama. The layout of the stupa, paddy fields and lake refers to the spatial organisation of the idealised form of governance that Amarasekara discusses in his socio-political criticism. The stupa represents Buddhism, the paddies the rural economy and the lake is symbolic of the role of kings in providing patronage, or infrastructure, to sustain this religio-economic system. In effect Wickramasinghe's imaginary of the *wewa*, *dagoba*, *yaya* – lake, stupa and paddy field – is the spatial representation of a 'structure of rural feeling' (Spencer 1990, 285). As I will explore in the concluding chapter, this imaginary also heavily influenced and shaped several decades of post-independence development work, extending from the 1940s well into the 1980s. Though expressed as an aesthetic concern in *Inimage Ihalata*, it was a discourse that had many political, social and economic implications in independent Sri Lanka. As we shall also see, Amarasekara struggles to extricate this imaginary from its political and developmental articulation in the late 1980s when he, along with a number of other Sinhala intellectuals, saw the political and developmental 'marketing' of this imaginary as a threat to its status as an index of Sinhala authenticity.

The extract above can be understood as Piyadasa's internalised response to this pastoral imaginary. When Piyadasa and Balamahattaya reach Kataragama and participate in the ceremonies at the Kataragama Hindu shrine, there is a divergence in their responses to the erotically charged ceremony. The text attributes Piyadasa's response to his education and exposure to Western culture and the distance it has created in him from his rural Buddhist ethos. Both Balamahattaya and Piyadasa enter the thronging mass of the ceremony and, in the midst of the music and dancing, Piyadasa feels a strong sensuous response within him. A little while later the two move to the relative quiet of the adjacent Buddhist temple complex because Balamahattaya wants to escape the noise, confusion and heat. Piyadasa then reflects on his experience:

Sitting on the low wall that surrounded the Bo-tree and listening to the cool wind rustle through the leaves Piyadasa attempted to sort out the thoughts in his mind. Was that strange and scintillating world he experienced a reality? Or was it an illusion created by his very eager reading of Lawrence's books in the recent past? It must

be because Lawrence's books were bringing to the surface a ghostly world hidden in the recesses of his mind. It cannot be denied that this place awakens the dark, rapacious side of an indecisive mind. It must be because Balamahattaya is different to him in mind and body that this place seemed sweaty and distasteful to him. Having grown up not within the gloomy confines of a school but in the light and airy atmosphere of the countryside, he would not possess such an uncertain consciousness.

(Amarasekara 1992, 23)

Piyadasa's and Balamahattaya's physical movement through the Kataragama temple – first the Hindu shrine and then the Buddhist temple – mimics what Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988, 166–8) identify as a symbolic trajectory implicit in the spatial layout of the temple complex. Gombrich and Obeyesekere observe that, because of its physical layout, those who enter the temple complex have to first visit the Hindu complex with its celebration of the senses, then pass along a path lined by beggars, and finally enter the Buddhist part of the complex. This follows what they describe as 'the Buddha's own renunciation of the world: his enjoyment of a life of hedonism; his confrontation with the four signs – sickness, old age, death, and the model of their transcendence in the yellow-robed mendicant; his final achievement of salvation – a calm, a blowing out, *nirvana*' (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, 167). Though Piyadasa and Balamahattaya do not go through this entire process, one can see how the contrast between the sensuality of the Hindu shrine and the serenity of the Buddhist temple is replicated in their experience.

The idea of sensuality and eroticism is central to Kataragama worship because the main ceremony at the shrine celebrates the mythical illicit sexual union of the god Skanda with his mistress Valli (Pfaffenberger 1979; Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). As both the spatial layout discussed by Gombrich and Obeyesekere and Balamahattaya's and Piyadasa's movement through the temple complex suggest, the sexuality of the ceremony needs to be subsumed and negated for it to become a Buddhist experience. But in the case of Piyadasa this movement is interrupted by what is posited as a Western discourse of modernity – the influence of D. H. Lawrence's work on his consciousness. Piyadasa is therefore presented as a man unmoored from his rural ethos but at the same time struggling to maintain a tenuous relationship with it. This tension in Piyadasa becomes more accentuated as the narrative moves to the University of Peradeniya and to Colombo, where he has to come to

terms with an authoritative academic discourse that radically critiques his rural value system.

The university and Colombo: academic discourse,
urban life and Sinhala identity

Piyadasa finds the university to be an intellectually arid place and the philosophy course he follows to be largely irrelevant to the world around him. The singular exception to this dreary university life is the literary scholar Ediriweera Sarachchandra, whom scholars often position as a more cosmopolitan foil to Wickramasinghe (Dissanayake 2005; Mohan 2012). *Inimage Ihalata* reproduces this distinction. However, the distinction itself is problematic because, though Sarachchandra did not endorse or promote Wickramasinghe's views about the rural, he did employ other sources of Sinhala authenticity. A critical element in Sarachchandra's theatre was Sinhala folk theatre, which was positioned as the localising or 'indigenising' element in his theatrical practice, indicating that notions of authenticity played a role in Sarachchandra's thinking as well. Another practice of Sarachchandra's – the renaming of a generation of Sinhala artistes with classical Sinhala–Sanskritic names, in place of their Western-sounding names – also indicated the desire for authenticity (Abeyasinghe 2016). Amarasekara's reductive interpretation of Sarachchandra as a character opposed to Sinhala authenticity serves the specific cultural politics and poetics informing *Inimage Ihalata*.

In one incident in the novel Sarachchandra is shown to be a derivative thinker who supports Eurocentric interpretations of Sinhala society. During a literary debate a sociologist refers to the work of the scholar Gananath Obeyesekere and argues that contemporary Sinhala Buddhist middle-class values are largely influenced by Victorian morality and that the culture of the rural peasantry is similar to that of the Veddah or aboriginal community of the country. This exchange is a reference to the notion of 'Protestant Buddhism' proposed by Obeyesekere, which holds that Buddhism in Sri Lanka was fundamentally altered in its encounter with colonial modernity and particularly through its adversarial encounters with missionary Christianity (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). Sarachchandra's character in Amarsekara's novel endorses this view:

'I do not know whether we can agree with all the opinions expressed by Senaratne [the sociologist]. But I would like to say that we

should submit them to intense scrutiny. I know for a fact that the views expressed by Professor Gananath Obeyesekere have been much admired by American sociologists. He has expressed these ideas following a long period of study. Obeyesekere has shown that the contemporary Buddhism in this country is a western construct.’
(Amarasekara 1992, 72)

This might be considered a rather cheesy, almost propagandist, piece of writing. However, the novel turns even more bizarrely self-referential when the reader discovers Amarasekara himself as a shadowy unnamed figure in the novel. Later in the story Saratchandra presents Piyadasa with a novel that he believes definitively establishes the derivative nature of contemporary Sinhala culture. This novel is none other than *Yali Upannemi* (I Was Reborn), Amarasekara’s own work published in 1962. Though the author of the novel remains unnamed in *Inimage Ihalata*, most Sinhala readers would recognise it as one of Amarasekara’s early books. By staging this incident Amarasekara recreates himself as a literary fiction so that he can condemn his earlier self – a self that doubted the existence of an essential Sinhala Buddhist identity. In *Inimage Ihalata* Piyadasa encounters this novel at a time when his general lack of self-confidence is at a particularly low ebb, following a failed romance at the university. Piyadasa immediately begins to identify with the central character in the novel and believes that the book reflects a general predicament in Sinhala middle-class society.

Piyadasa finished reading the novel *Yali Upannemi* given to him by Saratchandra in one night. Finishing the novel Piyadasa felt, like the main protagonist in it, that he had ended the life he had led so far and was reborn. He felt as if the novel had been written especially for him, looking at his inner consciousness, identifying the sickness that ailed it ... Ranatunga’s character [the main protagonist of the novel] was none other than his own.

A few days later Piyadasa went in search of Saratchandra with great joy.

‘This is an incredible work. This has revealed the consciousness of our entire middle class. This compares with the work of Lawrence and Dostoevsky ...’ said Piyadasa hardly pausing for breath.

‘Then my judgment was correct. My judgment is rarely wrong ...’

‘What do you think of the view that Ranatunga’s mind is formed by Theravada Buddhist and Victorian attitudes? I discussed this today with Dr Senaratne. He of course agrees completely. What are your thoughts?’ [said Sarachchandra.]

‘This novel proves that theory with valid evidence. I did not give it much thought when Dr Senaratne spoke about it that day. But after this novel I don’t think anybody can refuse to accept it ...’ [replied Piyadasa.]

(Amarasekara 1992, 89)

This incident deliberately invokes the historical controversy sparked off by the publication of Amarasekara’s novel *Yali Upannemi* (1962). As Wimal Dissanayake (2005, 68) discusses, the historical Sarachchandra, anticipating the public outcry that accompanied the publication of this book, publicly defended it. After its release Martin Wickramasinghe observed, ‘Gunadasa Amarasekara wrote *Yali Upannemi* without adequately understanding Buddhist culture and to demean it. I suppose he repents now for having written *Yali Upannemi* in that manner’ (quoted in Dissanayake 2005, 68). *Inimage Ihalata* comes the closest to a public recantation of his earlier work that Amarasekara has ever made.

Having failed to achieve an upper-second-class degree at university and the memories of his failed romance still fresh, Piyadasa joins the *Daily News*, a major English newspaper based in Colombo, as a journalist cum literary critic. The editor of the newspaper tells him they need a person to educate the English readership about Sinhala literature and culture, and Piyadasa soon produces a series of articles that express the kind of critique of Sinhala Buddhist identity found in *Yali Upannemi*. The editor is happy with Piyadasa’s work and commends him for initiating an important debate on Sinhala culture. This period in Colombo becomes one when the village and his family recede from Piyadasa’s life. He becomes increasingly involved in his work and a senior journalist also drags him into a life of regular drinking and visits to prostitutes. Thus, the aesthetic rural–urban binary invoked in the road trip at the beginning of the story becomes a more clearly enunciated ideological binary, the urban being posited as a site of questionable morality.

The novel ends with Piyadasa rediscovering his rural Sinhala self. As he is building his journalistic career he receives a letter from Martin Wickramasinghe arguing that his conception of Sinhala culture is wrong and that literary texts like *Yali Upannemi* misrepresent the rural Sinhala psyche. Piyadasa’s return to the rural comes about when Balamahattaya,

his rural uneducated cousin, re-enters his life. Piyadasa experiences a deep sense of guilt, about his neglect of the village and his family, when he realises that Balamahattaya is in Colombo to mortgage his house, his sole material possession, so that he can find the dowry for his younger sister's marriage – a sacrifice that reminds Piyadasa of his own familial obligations towards his sister. This incident prompts a lengthy critical introspection in Piyadasa, who eventually concludes that texts like *Yali Upannemi* do not reflect reality and that Balamahattaya represents the true humanism and value system of authentic rural Sinhala life.

The resolution of the novel demonstrates the narrative structure of a classic nineteenth-century Bildungsroman – a novel that charts the moral and psychological growth of its protagonist. Piyadasa initially becomes estranged from his rural ethos, only to return to it as a more enlightened and mature man. However, when looked at from outside the novel's own circular logic, Piyadasa's trajectory represents a dilemma – a dilemma central to Amarasekara's position as a Sinhala cultural nationalist. As we have seen in Amarasekara's socio-political criticism and in his fiction, there is a consistent need to establish a sense of historical continuity for Sinhala identity. The central argument running through much of his work is that a Sinhala cultural essence has survived the colonial encounter and that the urgent task of national revival is to rediscover this essence for the postcolonial present. At the same time, there is a constant sense of anxiety that the Sinhala middle classes are unmoored from this authenticity and need to be 're-educated' – a re-education that Piyadasa undergoes in the novel and by extension a re-education that Amarasakara has undergone in his own life. Amarasekara sees this process of re-education as central to his literary craft – a position he explicitly articulates in *Abudassa Yugayak* (1976).

We see this didactic approach to literature expressed even more strongly in two important short stories: *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya* (The Stone Statue and the Hollow Statue) and *Pilima Lowai Piyeve Lowai* (The World of Statues and the World of Reality) (Amarasekara 2001 [1987]). These two darkly ironic texts shift the focus from the 'fallen' middle class to the village and the peasantry. Although the two texts try to establish authenticity as an organic reality among the peasantry, they are intensely conscious of how authenticity had by the late 1980s become a politically appropriated discourse. One can see these two texts as Amarasekara's attempt to 'rescue' authenticity from its political articulation, but, read against the grain, this attempt also suggests that the post-independence discourse of Sinhala authenticity faced a moment of significant crisis in the late 1980s. If authenticity became politically

'alive' in independent Sri Lanka, Amarasekara's texts suggest authenticity also experienced a kind of 'death' in the late 1980s.

Stone statues, hollow statues and the life and death of authentic things

Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya (1987) and *Pilima Lowayi Piyawi Lowayi* (2001) were published 14 years apart but they form a single narrative, the sequel picking up where the previous story ends. The year 1987 marks the culmination of approximately a decade during which Sinhala cultural discourse faced a significant crisis. With the liberalisation of the economy in 1978 and the spread of electronic mass media including private TV and FM radio and cheap and accessible media formats such as audio and video cassettes, popular culture was in the ascendant and represented an urban aesthetic rather than one invested in an idealised village-based sense of Sinhala and Buddhist civilisational continuity. The 1980s also saw the government led by Sri Lanka's first executive president, J. R. Jayawardene, mobilising culture in a big way to promote an aggressive neo-liberal development programme (Tennekoon 1988). The centrepiece of the Jayawardene government's development agenda was the ambitious Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme launched in 1977. The programme – which involved hydroelectric generation, mass-scale irrigation and inland fisheries development – displaced thousands of Sinhala villages and altered the physical geography of Sri Lanka's longest river, the Mahaweli.

Though thoroughly progressivist and modern in ambition, the Mahaweli project was packaged and marketed with a distinctly 'traditional' aesthetic, which drew upon the discourse of ancient Sinhala civilisational and hydro-engineering achievements (Tennekoon 1988). At one level this canny marketing pre-empted criticism about the government's aggressive neo-liberal economic programme and the socio-cultural displacement caused by the Mahaweli project. At another level, though, the mobilisation of cultural symbols drew criticism from Sinhala intellectuals (Tennekoon 1990), as a distortion and commercialisation of culture. Alongside the Mahaweli development work the Jayawardene government also deployed another major discourse – the idea of a *dharmishta samajaya* or righteous society.

In this discourse the Jayawardene government sought to project the state as custodian of Sinhala Buddhist culture and values. It was also a strategic move to wrest moral authority from the *sangha* (Kemper

1991; Abeysekara 2002). The *dharmishta samajaya* discourse sought to silence a vocal segment of the *sangha* and Sinhala intelligentsia who were critical of the liberal economic policies of the Jayawardene government, which they saw as promoting the debasement of Sinhala culture. Ediriweera Sarachchandra was a prominent critical voice. He wrote a pamphlet entitled *Dharmishta Samajaya* (1982) in which he lampooned the government's discourse and was particularly critical of the rise of popular culture – referred to derisively at the time as 'cassette' culture. The 1980s also witnessed two other events that had a significant impact on Sri Lanka as a whole and Sinhala society in particular. The 1983 anti-Tamil pogrom and the international backlash against it led to intense academic scrutiny of Sinhala society, culture and tradition and heightened the narrative of Sinhala beleaguering (Tennekoon 1990). The second *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* (JVP) insurrection from 1987 to 1989 – which effectively emasculated the state with a bloody war of attrition and was followed by the state's brutal response of forming extra-judicial death squads that abducted and killed thousands of Sinhala youth – added to the disillusionment and despair in Sinhala society (Perera 1995).

Written in this context, *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya* is a story about perception and reality and the difficulty of distinguishing the authentic from the inauthentic. The ideological burden of the text, carried by its main protagonist, an educated and critically conscious village boy called Wimalasena, is to tease out the authentic from the inauthentic. Wimalasena's uneducated and illiterate father Upalis maintains an intrinsic link to authenticity, but it becomes Wimalasena's task to turn this organic imaginary into a critical political consciousness.

The story takes place in a village near the Gal Viharaya in Polonnaruwa, a famous site that contains ancient granite statues of the Buddha. Amarasekara has said in an interview that the story was inspired by a real event he witnessed on a visit to the Gal Viharaya in 1986 (Mendis 2005). A replica of one of the statues, which had been used in a Buddhist expo in London, was later placed in close proximity to the original reclining Buddha. In the story Upalis is the caretaker of the Gal Viharaya. He is a simple uneducated man with strong convictions about right and wrong and an intrinsic relationship to Buddhist cultural heritage. He is devoted to the stone statue of the reclining Buddha and believes it holds miraculous powers and is blessed by the gods – a belief shared by many villagers. But Upalis's stable world is thrown into disarray when the hollow replica of the original statue is placed alongside the original. Upalis is troubled by the imposition of this replica, because

the original for him signifies a mytho-historical narrative through which he makes sense of his world.

‘Why should you worry father ... if not nearby they can keep one on top of the other. If you get your pay at the end of the month that’s all that should matter to you. Let them keep it anywhere they like.’

‘How can I let that happen, I don’t look after this place just for the money. I look after it because god Gale Bandara told me to do so. It was while your mother was pregnant with you that god Gale Bandara came to me in a dream and told me to light a lamp here. This is no ordinary place. No one fully realises the miraculous powers of this place.

‘What this statue depicts is the Buddha’s parinirvana [passing away] ... It is at this moment that the Buddha called upon the supreme god Sakra and told him that Buddhism would survive for five thousand years in this country, and that this country should be protected. God Sakra called upon god Vishnu and gave the responsibility of protecting this country to god Vishnu. It is god Vishnu who has given this place to god Gale Bandara. This is no ordinary place ... Though they try to bring fake statues lying on rubbish heaps and dump them here.’

(Amarasekara 2001 [1987], 12)

The narrative the old man invokes against his son’s cynicism positions him as someone to whom this mytho-historical world is a reality. The stone statue embodies for Upalis an entire cultural ethos and his own place in this mytho-historical scheme. The statue also signifies the solidity and substance of tradition – a physical manifestation of tradition to which the old man can relate and pay homage. Upalis’s relationship to the statue reflects how the text perceives peasant consciousness. The statue as physical symbol plays an important role in mediating Upalis’s relationship to tradition. Upalis does not see the statue as a mere representation of tradition, as presumably an educated consciousness would, but as a living embodiment of tradition. The peasant psyche is thus seen as significant but limited – significant because of its relationship to tradition, but limited because this relationship is not critically reflective but iconographic in a way that borders on superstition. This relationship, as Upalis seems instinctively to realise, is also potentially self-negating, for what is there to prevent people from switching allegiance and worshipping another statue? It is on this point that he enters into an argument with

a young archaeological official and his aides, who have come to inspect the statues.

‘That is the thing. This is what I have been trying to explain to you gentlemen. Foolish people who can’t tell the real statue from the fake one will come and begin to worship this as well.’

‘What is this you are talking about old man, is there any sense in this county today about what the real statue is, and what the fake one is ... ? All you get today are fake statues. So what is wrong with putting this fake statue here? Why are you getting so worked up about it old man ... ? All you have to do is to accept the way the country is headed.’

‘Don’t think like that sir. Don’t think that while I am looking after this place I will allow this rubbish heap to be worshipped. It’s been twenty years since this Upalis began looking after the statue. During all that time I have not allowed any disrespect towards it ... You gentlemen probably don’t know its miraculous powers ... this is not any old statue ... god Gale Bandara resides here day and night ...’

‘That is how it is old man. These miracles happen the more you worship. When you begin to worship it this replica will also become miraculous. god Gale Bandara can look after this one too while he looks after the other ... no extra effort.’

‘It seems to me that this is a joke for you gentlemen ... anyway who told you gentlemen to do this?’ asked Upalis, attempting to control his anger.

‘These are not things happening according to what you and I want. Very big people want this. Otherwise, old man, do you think I like this ... ?’ the young man said because he sensed the anger in Upalis ... ‘These orders come from the highest places in this country.’

‘Is that really true sir ... you mean by the highest places ... the President? The Prime Minister?’

‘I don’t know that. All I know is that the orders come from very high places,’ said the young man.

‘I don’t think so sir ... Will those great people allow things like this? I don’t believe it sir.’

(Amarasekara 2001 [1987], 19–20)

This dialogue foregrounds what are seen as challenges posed to stable cultural signifiers in contemporary society. Upalis’s and the young

official's diametrically opposed views of tradition represent a generational gap: the cultural imaginary so central to Upalis's life has not been internalised by the younger man. The younger man's scepticism can also be attributed to his education; he finds Upalis's superstitions amusing. The 'aura of authenticity' of the original statue has little hold over the young archaeological officer's imagination (Benjamin 1970).

The young man's scepticism also relates directly to the cultural politics of the 1980s. In an ironic turn of events, a politician decides to have the replica painted in gold and organises a major event with ministers and prominent Buddhist priests presiding over it. The event is presented as a surreal farce, the various government dignitaries and Buddhist priests contributing to what is essentially a charade. One priest even draws comparisons between the painting of the statue by the current government and acts of benevolence by ancient kings towards Buddhism – a reference to how the Jayawardene government sought to project itself as continuing the 'work of kings' (Seneviratne 1999). During Jayawardene's tenure, the *Mahavamsa* was 'updated' to cover his presidency. In his autobiography *Golden Threads* he even placed himself in a genealogy of Sinhala kings (Krishna 1999, 31–58).

From father to son: retrieving and reanimating the authentic

Parallel to the father's crisis of authenticity, the son, Wimalasena, encounters a similar critique of contemporary society in the political indoctrination classes conducted by the JVP. At one of the classes, Wimalasena listens to a JVP speaker explain how the idea of righteous governance is exploited by the present regime. He is convinced by this argument but does not accept the Marxist critique of religion that accompanies it. Wimalasena's reservations about Marxism at this point in the narrative turn into a complete rejection at the end. What we see here is a shift in Amarasekara's own position from the early 1980s, where he held out the possibility of a Buddhist–Marxist synthesis, to one that is more explicitly nativist. At one level it reflects an ideological and conceptual shift, but it can be seen as underwritten by the specific historical context described above. Given the insidious nature of the 1987–9 JVP uprising – which effectively brought civilian life to a standstill and crippled the state through a sustained campaign of anti-state violence that was qualitatively different from the 1971 insurrection – sympathy for the JVP among the Sinhala intelligentsia was much less. One could

speculate that, given the international condemnation of Sinhala society after 1983 and perceived leftist sympathy for the Tamil cause, Marxism had become less attractive to Sinhala cultural nationalists.

The text, while invoking the *dharmishta samajaya* discourse, does not foreground the cultural and historical insecurities informing its turn to authenticity. Instead the narrative denouement shows Wimalasena making a judicious choice between alternative indigenous political futures. At first, he begins to perceive a connection between what he learnt in the JVP classes and the binary between the stone statue and the replica – that the replica is a symbolic representation of how the idea of a righteous society is being manipulated to deceive people. But diverging from the JVP's position, which extends this critique to suggest that all religious belief is politically disabling, Wimalasena returns to tradition and authenticity.

Wimalasena witnesses how the gold-painted statue begins to attract more and more villagers despite Upalis's best efforts to discourage them. At the same time, Upalis loses his buffaloes. Unable to find them for several days, he turns to the stone statue for help. His prayers produce no results, but, unknown to him, his wife has offered prayers to the gold-painted replica. Much to Upalis's annoyance, the buffaloes turn up the following day and the wife reveals to him that she has prayed at the replica. Struggling to comprehend these events, Upalis becomes increasingly dispirited. Wimalasena, observing his father's dilemma, discusses it with his friend Wijeyesundara and hatches a plan to blow up the replica. This scheme goes awry and the friend dies in the ensuing explosion. The story ends here, without offering a resolution to the moral and political crisis of authenticity.

Pilima Lowayi Piyawi Lowayi picks up the story 14 years later and provides a more resolute and clear-cut return to authenticity. After his friend's death, Wimalasena suffers depression. Upalis desperately seeks help for his son from various sources and in the end goes in search of another newly anointed replica that is said to have miraculous powers. At the site of this new statue Wimalasena in a dream-like sequence encounters the ghost of Wijeyesundara. The next morning he wakes up cured of his illness. Wimalasena's dialogue with Wijeyesundara's 'ghost' becomes a didactic lecture on authenticity and national political and cultural revival.

'All this time what I did was think about these things, I thought about what we did from beginning to end ... During that time

I was often reminded of the things you said. In short, Marxism is also another hollow statue ... a statue without a core. Another hollow statue imported to deceive us and to create a fairytale world around us ...'

'What you are trying to say is that we need to explain the difference between the hollow statue and the stone statue, isn't it?'

'Exactly right ... We never realised that. We thought all statues are the same ... That we should destroy all of them ... That we can't have a revolution otherwise. It was only during these past few days I realised how much of a lie that was. Without the body of dharma [doctrine/guiding principles] represented by the stone statue, what revolution can we achieve? It is up to you to sort out the various strands of this body of dharma and explain it ...'

'But how do we know such a body of dharma still exists? I don't have the same belief I had earlier. Sometimes I feel that all these statues are the same.'

'Don't talk rubbish. This is not a time to be talking rubbish! If we don't explain this dharma and don't explain the significance of the world of stone statues we are finished ... you are finished ... the country is finished ... the people are finished ... remember that.'

Wimalasena felt Wijeyesundara attempting to embrace him as he said this.

Just at that moment Wimalasena felt very cold as if his feet had encountered a puddle of cold water.

(Amarasekara 2001, 98–104)

The text does not end here. It takes the discourse of authenticity one step further and projects Wimalasena as representative of an emergent generation of rural educated Sinhala youth who will realise politically the unfulfilled promise of 1956. Once Wimalasena returns to the village he reflects that Dharmapala's and Martin Wickramasinghe's writing contains the authenticity he is searching for (Amarasekara 2001, 111). This conviction is further strengthened through conversations he has with a teacher, who presents a historical narrative of nationalism that positions Wimalasena's generation as the moment of arrival.

'The generation that was there when this country received independence did not even know there was such a cultural current. The subsequent generation – the generation of '56 – realised dimly that there was something. My generation, which came after that saw it

better than them. I have a strong belief that your generation will see this completely.'

'I think you are right sir. At least my generation knows what the stone statue is and what the hollow statue is.'

(Amarasekara 2001, 113)

The text thus ends in a confident teleology that sees Wimalasena's generation as the fruition of a process of nationalist arrival. Placed in their historical context, we can see *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya* and *Pilima Lowayi Piyawi Lowayi* as expressions of cultural-nationalist anxiety about the decline of authenticity. Something of this anxiety is also revealed in the short introduction to the stories, where Amrasekara argues that contemporary Sinhala cultural production is characterised by either intellectually arid populist work or what he sees as the frenzied articulations of postmodernist writers (Amarasekara 2001, unnumbered preface). The narrative of tradition and continuity Wimalasena articulates becomes important in this context. But Wimalasena himself – as much as Dharmapala and Bandaranaike, whom Amarasekara constructs as father figures of Sinhala authenticity – represents the paradox of authenticity. Though presented as a subaltern village boy, Wimalasena does not have the same intrinsic connection to tradition that his father has. It is only through the events of the story, and specifically through the agency of the schoolteacher, that he gains this knowledge. Therefore, despite the text's insistence that a traditional cultural imaginary remains, its nature and definition remain elusive. It is only through the mediation of a consciousness that grasps culture as an abstract concept – an educated consciousness like that of the teacher and Wimalasena – that tradition can be given a fixed form. This is a double bind that has characterised most of the nationalist thought explored so far.

There is insistence that a cultural essence remains unaltered. But often the nationalist thinkers themselves are educated and socially mobile and thus disconnected from this cultural essence. It is in this context that the idealised image of Buddhism, the peasant or the village becomes important. At the same time, these idealisations rarely correspond with reality. This results in an attempt to reform the locations in which authenticity is thought to reside. Dharmapala attempted to achieve this authenticity through moral reform and Banadaranaike and other post-independence Sinhala politicians sought to do so through government policy. Amarasekara attempts to change attitudes through his fiction.

Conclusion

Amarasekara's socio-political and fictional writing constitutes a site on which the poetics and politics of authenticity converge. By drawing upon Dharmapala and Bandaranaike as figures of historical Sinhala authenticity, Amarasekara gives intellectual form and expression to a narrative of Sinhala postcolonial revival. His writing both reveals the reductive processes through which historical figures are reconstituted as authentic beings in nationalist discourse and at the same time reveals the complex and contradictory terrain on which this contemporary articulation of authenticity unfolds. Deconstructing Amarasekara's narrative of authenticity is relatively easy, but the more critically productive task is to raise questions as to why authenticity matters to him and by extension why it matters in Sinhala cultural and political discourse in general.

We see in Amarasekara's writing the conditions under which authenticity became a culturally as well as politically influential discourse in the early 1960s. For Sinhala intellectuals such as Wickramasinghe and Amarasekara, defining authenticity is connected to the cultural politics of decolonisation. This turn to tradition and the need to assert a sense of cultural continuity is not unique to Sri Lanka or to Sinhala writers. It is visible in Indian writing – for instance in the work of R. K. Narayan, where the fictional village of Malgudi becomes a place where colonial influences and the forces of modernity are absorbed by a resilient sense of Indianness that survives all that is thrown at it. In Africa an entire generation of writers such as Chinua Achebe in Nigeria and Ngugi wa Thiongo in Kenya spurned what they saw as colonial forms of writing and expression and embraced local languages and culture. However, particularly in Africa, with the failure of newly independent African nation states to live up to their promise of decolonisation, this postcolonial euphoria quickly soured. Many African writers, including Achebe and Ngugi, began to question the nation state. In India this trend has a longer history, writers like Rabindranath Tagore having questioned the nation state and nationalism long before decolonisation.

In Sri Lanka, particularly in Sinhala writing, what we see is a kind of tacit cultural compact with the postcolonial state. From the 1950s up to the 1980s the work of writers such as Wickramasinghe, Sarachchandra and Amarasekara was implicitly aligned with statist discourses of culture, particularly in the way the village is imagined as a site of authenticity that is in turn foreshadowed by a grander classical Sinhala civilisational heritage. It is only in the 1980s that

this cultural compact began to fracture, with neo-liberal economic reforms, the international condemnation of Sinhala society because of discrimination and violence against Tamils, and the explicit commodification of culture and its mobilisation for economic and political ends. As I will explore in the concluding chapter, the narrative of authenticity that is so well illustrated in Amarasekara's writing was also informed and shaped by a parallel developmental and political narrative of authenticity. The 1980s was a period when this developmental and political narrative also went into crisis – mirroring its crisis in the cultural domain. However, the work of authenticity in postcolonial Sri Lanka is not done. The particular discourse of Sinhala authenticity Amarasekara represents may have limited traction today, but other discourses of authenticity are emerging to occupy this space. Authenticity's postcolonial afterlife is the focus of the conclusion of this book.

6

Conclusion: the postcolonial afterlife of authenticity

Introduction

Liyanage Amarakeerthi's award-winning 2013 novel *Kurulu Hadawatha* (A Bird's Heart) features as its protagonist Dinasiri Kurulugangoda, a budding radio producer struggling for fresh ideas to promote his channel. Earlier in the novel, Dinasiri changes his name from Walangangoda, which means 'Village of Potters' (indicative of his low caste), to Kurulugangoda, which means 'Village of Birds', which has more aesthetic appeal and no caste overtones. Idly doodling a rough sketch of his village in the studio, he has a moment of epiphany. He realises that his village is shaped like a bird's head and that his house, at the centre of the village, is like the eye of the bird. All of a sudden, 'looking back' as it were to his village from his current metropolitan vantage, Dinasiri discovers a rural aesthetic. From this point onwards, Kurulugangoda's career as purveyor of rustic village authenticity carries him to dizzying heights in the media industry. His success ranges from invitations to cultural talk shows on national television to multi-million-rupee product endorsements for multinationals.

Amarakeerthi's novel responds to the immanent structure of authenticity that has characterised the Sinhala nationalist imagination for well over a century and has shaped significant aspects of Sri Lankan social and political life, including state policies on economics, development and culture. The essence of Sinhala identity in this thinking lies in the village – in its rustic simplicity, and a moral order informed by Buddhism but also haunted by classical Sinhala civilization and its monumental achievements, even though the contemporary Sinhala village has little to show of this legacy. If the 'empirical' village fails to live up to this idealised village the task of nationalism becomes to reshape 'reality'

to fit the ideal. This discourse is deeply intertwined with the notion of *apekama*.

As we have seen, this authenticity has had many guises and manifestations since it was first constructed in the nineteenth century. From the 1950s Sinhala intellectuals saw themselves as arbiters of a national imagination. Their attempts to formulate Sinhala authenticity could not escape its statist articulation – an articulation that in the end engulfs authenticity and eviscerates it from within. By the late 1980s, when Amarasekara wrote *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya* (1987), the standard signifiers of Sinhala authenticity were already starting to look tired and time-worn. In this conclusion I explore how the ‘death’ of a certain kind of cultural authenticity charted in the [previous chapter](#) was underwritten by its political and developmentalist exploitation and overuse. Although it would be too hasty to pronounce the certain demise of this form of authenticity, it now lacks the gloss and appeal it had in the first decades following independence.

This chapter has two parts. It begins with the story of authenticity’s political and developmental ‘death’ and extends this story to the rise of popular culture in the 1980s through an important cultural debate that took place in the late 1980s. In order to provide a counter-narrative to the mainstream cultural articulation of authenticity, I also provide a brief overview of avant-garde artistic trends from the 1960s to the 1980s. In the second part of the chapter I reflect on authenticity’s continuing resonance in contemporary Sinhala public life and then conclude with some thoughts on authenticity’s structural relationship with both postcolonial nationalism and postcolonial scholarship.

Authenticity’s developmentalist and political death

A narrative of village-based authenticity became central to post-independence development discourse in the 1940s and 1950s, mirroring the primacy of the village in the cultural articulation of Sinhala nationalism since the early twentieth century. This narrative went into crisis in the 1980s. A rapidly changing social, political and economic landscape had begun to render it irrelevant. Three key moments in the developmental history of Sri Lanka illustrate the transformations that the village as an idea has experienced in independent Sri Lanka: the Gal Oya Irrigation Scheme of the late 1940s, the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme (AMDP) of the late 1970s and early 1980s and the *Gam Udawa* (Village Reawakening) scheme of the 1980s. *Gam Udawa*,

I argue, marks the beginning of the end for the village as a site of authenticity and cultural and political Sinhala ideological reproduction.

Three moments in the developmental articulation of the village

The village, as we've seen, intermittently appears in Sinhala cultural and nationalist discourse from the nineteenth century onwards. In Anagarika Dharmapala's imagination the peasantry was largely seen as a community that needed reform and education in order to be socialised into modernity. Dharmapala's 'Daily Code for the Laity' was clearly influenced by Victorian notions of morality and conduct (Obeyesekere 1976, 247–8). It did not draw from village practice. A more idealised, if naïve and historically misinformed, articulation of the village was visible in the early twentieth-century writing of S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike. The young Bandaranaike's 1933 pamphlet entitled *The Spinning Wheel and the Paddy Field* sought to graft a Gandhian notion of village-based development on to Sri Lanka, despite the fact that spinning was not a historically established industry in the country. Paddy cultivation, the other symbol of his village-based imaginary, was a historically established practice and one that colonial historiography and sociology had made central to Sri Lanka's grand historical narrative. Bandaranaike was not alone among educated Sri Lankans in regarding the village as a site of authenticity (Samaraweera 1981; Rogers 1990). The difference between Dharmapala and Bandaranaike is that whereas the former sees few redeeming qualities in villagers, the latter, though wanting to reform villagers, also idealises them. What is also visible in the transition from Dharmapala to Bandaranaike and on to Amarasekara is how the village occupies an ambiguous position in cultural and political discourse. It is at once a site of decay and decline and also a site that holds the potential for the rejuvenation of the nation.

D. S. Senanayake and the Gal Oya Irrigation Scheme

One of the first substantive moments of the developmental articulation of the village was the Gal Oya Irrigation Scheme, which began in 1949, one year after Sri Lanka received independence. This project was promoted by Sri Lanka's first prime minister, D. S. Senanayake. As minister of lands and agriculture in the State Council from 1931 onwards, Senanayake had settled Sinhala peasant families in the arid North Central and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka. In doing so, he was guided by a grand vision of resurrecting Sri Lanka's ancient hydraulic civilisation. This was

a ministerial portfolio over which Bandaranaike and Senanayake, both members of the CNC, had fought fiercely because of the political capital it provided among the peasant constituency (Manor 1989). The ideological vision that shaped the Gal Oya Irrigation Scheme is succinctly expressed by R. L. Brohier, a member of the Gal Oya Governing Board:

Ceylon has always mainly been an agricultural country. Hence, the parent earth was, and ever will be, the heart of Ceylon life. Truly the original decree that sent man forth a 'tiller of the ground', is perhaps even truer in its natural than its metaphysical sense, when reviewed in the comprehensive landscape of agriculture in Ceylon from the early years of Aryan settlement 2500 years ago, through 23 centuries of Sinhalese kingship.

(Brohier 1955–6, 68)

Brohier shows that economic considerations were subsidiary when it came to the restoration of the Minneriya tank, a large irrigation reservoir that was rehabilitated in 1934–5.

The primary purpose of the Senanayake enterprise to colonize Minneriya was social rather than economic. The returns he realized were not to be measured so much in solid rupees, but in the splendid satisfaction of having developed ... rich and fertile lands for Ceylon and her people out of a vast area which had been lying forgotten and neglected for centuries.

(Brohier 1955–6, 72)

This is an astonishing statement from a mid twentieth-century policy-maker in a developing country with large-scale poverty and limited resources.

J. R. Jayawardene and the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme

The second moment in this developmental narrative is the AMDP, initiated by the government led by J. R. Jayawardene which came into power in 1977. Jayawardene moved away from the welfare-state model adopted by successive Sri Lankan post-independence governments. Instead, he pursued an aggressive neo-liberal economic strategy (Wickramasinghe 2006, 135). This was also a time when a new Sinhala word entered the political and policy lexicon in Sri Lanka – *samwardhanaya*

(development). As it was defined and deployed by the Jayawardene regime, *samwardhanaya* sought to negotiate the contradictions between rapid modernisation and neo-liberal economic reforms and a sense of tradition and cultural continuity (Tennekoon 1990). To smooth out the contradictions, the development discourse was heavily ritualised and presented as a modern discourse based on science and technology which also preserved the culture and tradition of the Sinhala people. This dual articulation of development was distinctly visible in the AMDP.

The AMDP was funded mainly by the Conservative British government of Margaret Thatcher. The project sought to tap Sri Lanka's longest river, the Mahaweli, at key upstream locations. It diverted water from the wet zone to the dry zone to irrigate 320,000 acres of new land and 80,000 acres of existing agricultural land while simultaneously generating hydroelectricity (Mahaweli Authority 2013). The river was dammed at four locations in the country's highlands, involving significant resettlement of communities living along the river valley. Nearly 140,000 peasant families from other parts of the country were resettled in the newly irrigated areas. Ironically, a significant number of Kandyan villages were displaced – villages that were once an image of the rural Sinhala authenticity promoted by early twentieth-century Orientalists like Ananda Coomaraswamy (Brow 1999).

The AMDP was an ambitious project, which envisioned propelling Sri Lanka into economic prosperity and development through cheap hydroelectricity and efficient agricultural production. It was packaged through a distinctly traditional aesthetic (Tennekoon 1988). This packaging sought to pre-empt criticism about the displacement and socio-cultural disruption the AMDP caused. It was a marketing strategy, but at another level this was a narrative that powerful agents within the government, like Gamini Dissanayake, the Minister of Mahaweli Development, believed in. A number of monuments, including a massive stupa overlooking the Kotmale reservoir, which was named the *Mahaweli Maha Seya* (Great Mahaweli Stupa), were commissioned, to give a distinctly Buddhist and Sinhala ethos to the project. One can see a clear continuity in the cultural imaginary informing the Jayawardene government in the 1980s and what D. S. Senanayake attempted in the 1950s. Both Jayawardene and Senanayake saw themselves as continuing the 'work of kings' (Seneviratne 1999).

The AMDP can also be seen as nestled within the larger political discourse deployed by the Jayawardene government to claim political and moral legitimacy. This was the discourse of a *nidahas dharmishta rajyak* (Kemper 1990), which may be translated as 'free and righteous

state or kingdom' – the discourse to which Amarasekara's *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya* was responding. This discourse attempted to arrogate to the government the function of moral arbiter and thereby neutralise any criticism of its economic reform agenda, which included the commercialisation and commodification of many aspects of society as part of its aggressive modernisation strategy. The 'free' in this slogan referred more to the 'free economic policy', meaning relaxation of state regulation of the economy, than to any substantive sense of individual or societal liberty.

It is from the AMDP and the Jayawardene government's deployment of *dharmishta samajaya* that an explicit connection to the cultural and aesthetic discourse about the village and authenticity can be drawn. The *dharmishta* discourse, as we saw in the [previous chapter](#), was challenged and critiqued by the Sinhala cultural intelligentsia and was satirised in newspapers (Tennekoon 1990). Many Sinhala intellectuals saw the Jayawardene government as commodifying and debasing culture by opening the flood gates to popular and populist trends. This explicit commodification of culture and the insecurity it created are apparent in Amarasekara's writing. The Jayawardene government's period in power and the AMDP can therefore be seen as an occasion when the implicit cultural compact between the statist political articulation of authenticity and its expression in mainstream Sinhala cultural production began to break down. If the Jayawardene period marks the 'beginning of the end', the crisis of authenticity came to a head soon after Jayawardene left office.

Ranasinghe Premadasa and *Gam Udawa*

The third moment in this narrative of developmental discourse and cultural articulation is the *Gam Udawa* (Village Reawakening) programme – which saw a major rural housing programme led by Jayawardene's successor as executive president, Ranasinghe Premadasa (Hennayake 2006). The *Gam Udawa* programme was coterminous with the AMDP and began shortly after the Jayawardene government swept into power in 1977. Premadasa was prime minister in this government. He came from an urban working-class background and was seen as a brash 'upwardly mobile commoner', who was grudgingly accommodated by the elite political establishment (Jayatileka 2001). In Premadasa's economic vision the village was a site of negotiation between modernisation, industrialisation and popular culture. Rather than a paddy-based village culture, Premadasa promoted the building of model villages, whose

physical layout resembled the centrally concentrated urban housing he was familiar with, having grown up amidst urban poverty (Peiris 2013, 174). The ubiquitous garment factory, which became a symbol of social mobility for many rural women, was another key feature of Premadasa's tenure as president: Jayawardene also promoted factories, but in industrial zones, whereas Premadasa took them into villages. There was a shift in the vision of the rural economy from one based on agriculture to one that included manufacturing and wage labour (Lynch 2007).

Like the AMDP, *Gam Udawa* coded its neo-liberal economic programme in 'traditional' imagery and symbolism (Hennayake 2006, 148–50). This was most visible in the *Gam Udawa* exposition, which was held each year from 1979 to mark Premadasa's birthday. The event grew in size and importance along with Premadasa's political career and was a major cultural and political spectacle by the time he became executive president in 1989. A week-long festive celebration, it was designed to promote Premadasa's socio-economic vision, his political currency as the benefactor of the masses, and his image as a man of the people. Every *Gam Udawa* featured various replicas of historic sites and monuments from other parts of the country – for instance, miniature versions of the sacred Adam's Peak or replicas of famous Buddhist statues (Hennayake 2006; Peiris 2013). In some cases there were replicas of replicas, one *Gam Udawa* imitating a previous one (Rajasingham 2013, 54). The intent, as in the AMDP, was to create a sense of continuity and tradition, but, given Premadasa's proclivity for popular culture and the presence of these replicas in what was essentially a giant carnival – replete with musical shows, thrill rides and clowns – the overall effect was of a kitschy pastiche. The village, and the larger cultural imaginary it represented, became a commodity. If the AMDP began this process of marketing the village, *Gam Udawa* took it to a new surreal level.

These three moments of developmental discourse are representative of the political economy of post-independence authenticity in Sinhala nationalist discourse. Post-independence mainstream cultural discourse, which also had features of a 'high' cultural discourse, had wittingly or unwittingly tied its fortunes to a statist understanding of authenticity. Because of this widespread and ubiquitous presence of authenticity in Sinhala society, when it faced a crisis in the developmental and political sphere this crisis was also keenly felt in the cultural sphere.

Challenges to authenticity did not simply arise from politics and development discourse. The rise of popular culture was another factor in the demise of authenticity in the late 1980s. Ranasinghe Premadasa was a patron of popular culture and *Gam Udawa* was a site where popular

culture was given free reign. A cultural debate that occurred in 1987, the same year that *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya* was published, provides an entry point to explore the role of popular culture and how it impacted on the discourse of authenticity.

Popular culture and Sinhala authenticity

In 1987 a cultural debate was sparked by the death of H. R. Jothipala, an immensely popular Sinhala singer. This debate speaks to many of the issues underlying the insecurity of Amaresekera's *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya*. Jothipala sang thousands of songs set to popular Hindi melodies and was a regular performer at *Gam Udawa* exhibitions. He was promoted vigorously by Premadasa but was shunned by the cultural establishment. When Jothipala died, shortly after singing at a *Gam Udawa* exposition, thousands attended his funeral at the Borella cemetery in Colombo. Another popular star, the actress Ramani Bartholomuesz, died within a few months of Jothipala. A similar outpouring of public support and grief was evident at her funeral. This prompted prominent cultural critic Sarath Amunugama to write an article entitled *Binda Wetunu Sanskruthika Balakanuwa* (Fall of a Cultural Pillar). Amunugama (1987a) argued provocatively that the thousands of young people who attended Jothipala's and Bartholomuesz's funerals were indicative of a paradigm shift in cultural discourse in the country. He asserted that the shunning of Jothipala by the Sinhala cultural establishment came at a price, because he was a potential bridge between popular culture and the 'high tradition' of Sinhala culture. Amunugama's critique was wide-ranging. He was not simply talking about music or movie stars. He was making direct reference to the *weva*, *dagoba* discourse – the rural Sinhala aesthetic that had dominated Sri Lanka's post-independence cultural discourse. He was arguing that for a new generation attracted to a different rhythm of life the *weva* and *dagoba* held little appeal.

Amunugama's piece produced a furious exchange of views in the *Divayina* (The Island) newspaper over several months. Ediriweera Sarachchandra responded to Amunugama's thesis dismissively, asserting the continued relevance of high culture. Three others who joined the debate were A. J. Gunawardana and Regi Siriwardena – literary critics and academics – and Ajith Samaranayake, a senior journalist (Samaranayake 2004). Gunawardana and Siriwardena recognised the importance of the cultural shift Amunugama was signalling, but argued for a kind of 'middle path' that maintained high culture but also accommodated popular culture. It is telling that even Siriwardena, one of the most

progressive and versatile cultural critics of his time (see Siriwardena 2006), was not completely willing to take popular culture seriously. However, A. J. Gunawardana, who was a mass-media scholar, critiqued the 'protectionist' attitude towards culture among the Sinhala intelligentsia and argued that, with the growth of electronic mass media, divisions between 'high' and 'low' cultural forms were unsustainable (Gunawardana 1990, 3).

As Amunugama's concluding salvo to this debate suggests, no one in the Sinhala cultural establishment was really willing to take popular culture seriously (Amunugama 1987b). Amunugama's main target was Ajith Samaranayake, who adopted a leftist position by claiming that popular culture is a form of escapism. To this, Amunugama's impatient response was to characterise Samaranayake's views as representing an imitative and unimaginative Marxist position. He pointed out how various forms of popular culture such as jazz, country and western or the music of the Beatles had been recognised as important forms of cultural expression (Amunugama 1987b).

This debate brings us full circle. The shunning of Jothipala by the musical and cultural establishment of the late 1980s and the cultural nativism that informed the *Danno Budunge* controversy of 2016 – when an operatic rendition of a song associated with Sinhala high culture was heavily criticised for its perceived deviance from tradition and authenticity – have an uncanny resemblance. Qualitatively one can make a distinction between the two incidents. Some who objected to Jothipala may not have objected to Kishani Jayasinghe's operatic rendition, since the 1987 debate was defined by the contrast between high and low culture whereas Kishani's singing, though 'Western', belonged to a high cultural tradition. However, Amunugama's argument was not just about high culture versus low culture, but about how a cultural discourse that was carefully nurtured in independent Sri Lanka and closely associated with national authenticity had become irrelevant. The responses to Amunugama were also shaped by the question of what qualified as legitimate national cultural expression. This cultural debate was not laid to rest in the 1980s. To judge by the reactions to Jayasinghe in 2016, it is one that still lives on. But in terms of national signifiers of authenticity the 1987 debate, along with the *Gam Udawa* pastiche of culture and Amarasekara's *Gal Pilimaya Saha Bol Pilimaya*, marks a distinct moment when the death of a certain kind of authenticity became visible and publicly articulated. If the 1950s marked the high point in the emergence of a nationalist cultural aesthetic closely tied to a discourse of authenticity which spanned art, culture, politics and development, the late 1980s saw the demise of

this discourse. Authenticity, as in Amarakeerthi's *Kurulu Hadawatha*, was rendered surreal and entered an ironic age.

Authenticity in an ironic age: roads taken and not taken in Sinhala culture

Though a sense of authenticity grounded in a pastoral ideal has pervaded a significant spectrum of Sinhala culture-making in independent Sri Lanka, it is important to note that there were other initiatives that imagined culture differently. These alternative imaginaries expressed themselves in different artistic genres. In prose and poetry the work of Siri Gunasinghe from the 1960s – he emigrated to Canada in the 1970s – was modernist in both content and form and sought to break away from the dominant realist mode of storytelling established by Martin Wickramasinghe. It was also thematically radical, as in Amarasekara's early work, pushing Sinhala subjectivity out of its traditional Buddhist and rural frameworks of reference (Amarakeerthi 2017).

In theatre there was a reactionary realist backlash against the myth-inspired classical dramatic tradition of Ediriweera Sarachchandra. The playwright Sugathapala de Silva, who formed the theatre group *Apey Kattiya* (Our People) in the 1960s, produced work that was a direct reaction to what he saw as the classical elitism and social irrelevance of the work of Sarachchandra. The titles of some of the early plays, such as *Boarding Karayo* (Boarding-House Guys) or *Thattu Geval* (Tenements), indicate an earthy urban realism that was influenced by the work of American dramatists such as Tennessee Williams. These plays implicitly question the postcolonial cultural euphoria and stylistic elitism in the works of Sarachchandra. De Silva and the members of *Apey Kattiya* considered themselves outsiders to the social and cultural milieu represented by Sarachchandra and the postcolonial Sinhala high culture of the 1950s (Ranaweera 2012).

Gamini Haththotuwegama's Wayside and Open Theatre group was a significant alternative theatrical presence from the 1970s and has continued to function despite the founder's death in 2009. Haththotuwegama's theatrical practice throughout his career was oppositional – refusing the proscenium theatre and other institutional performance spaces in favour of street corners, bus stands and pavements (Dharmasiri 2012, 17). The group experimented with many forms, including absurdism, physical theatre and surrealism. The performers were drawn largely from working-class backgrounds. However, Haththotuwegama's work received limited recognition from the cultural

establishment and remained very much on the margins of mainstream Sinhala cultural discourse. It was only in 2012, three years after his death, that a volume about his work published by one of his former students (Dharmasiri 2012).

Another significant presence in this alternative movement was the film director Dharmasena Pathiraja, who gained prominence in the 1970s and has been described as a ‘rebel with a cause’ (Wee 2003) and as ‘the Left-oriented film maker’ (Wedwardena 2016). Pathiraja’s films – like Sugathapala de Silva’s and Hatthotuwegama’s plays – can be seen in part as a reaction to the bourgeois nationalist aesthetic of the 1950s and as a response to rapid social and political changes. In film the equivalent of Sarachchandra and Wickramasinghe was Lester James Peiris, an internationally renowned and stylistically accomplished film-maker whose iconic cinematic work, *Gamperaliya*, was based on the novel of the same title by Wickramasinghe. Peiris’s cinema, like Wickramasinghe’s fiction, was marked by a bourgeois realist aesthetic and an intense fascination with themes of rural disintegration.

Pathiraja has indicated that his cinema is an attempt to break free of this mould and explore new forms and thematic concerns in search of alternative modes of cinematic expression (Pathiraja 2009a, 5). He has compared his cinematic journey to that of Ritwik Ghatak in India and drawn comparisons between his situation in relation to Peiris and that of Ghatak in relation to Satyajit Rai (Wedwardena 2016). Peiris’s cinema is often seen as the founding of a modern Sri Lankan (read Sinhala) cinema and therefore a norm against which alternative expressions like Pathiraja’s are judged. The normative influence of Peiris’s cinema meant that funding and production opportunities for avant-garde artists such as Pathiraja were limited. Peiris’s international acclaim can also be attributed to some extent to his themes of rural life, feudal family structures and rural change, which may have had an Orientalist fascination for Western critics (Pathiraja 2009b).

The 1987 cultural debate, which was later dubbed the ‘cemetery cultural debate’, was revived in 1990 in the pages of *Arthika Vimasuma* (Economic Inquiry), a magazine edited by Tisarane Gunasekara, a prominent bilingual public intellectual (Gunasekara 1990). Two of the original contributors, A. J. Gunawardana (1990) and Ajith Samaranayake (1990), featured in an issue of this publication. Both Gunasekara and Gunawardana argued that a static view of culture was untenable. They argued that, just as the economy had been liberalised in the late 1970s, culture too was a domain where change was inevitable. Ajith Samaranayake, who had initially held a somewhat conservative

position in 1987, proposed a ‘middle path’ where new trends would be accommodated alongside old ones. The overall tenor of this iteration of the 1987 debate was that the culture signified by the *wewa*, *dagoba* discourse was no longer a reality and that Sinhala society had moved on. Perhaps the irony of this moment of cultural introspection in 1990 is that the alternative cultural discourses sketched above received little institutional support or recognition and were marginalised by the Sinhala cultural intelligentsia. But in the wake of the ‘death of authenticity’ it was not these socially invested alternative discourses that gained ground, but a populist and commodified cultural discourse aggressively promoted by privately owned electronic media. Sinhala cultural authenticity still survives in this context but in a ghostly and uncanny form.

Authenticity in an ironic age

Authenticity today

Iconic representatives of Sinhala culture now openly lament the loss of authenticity. For instance, Rohana Beddage, who made a name for himself as a folk artist as well as a popular folklorist, gave an interview to a newspaper bemoaning how the idea of the village now exists only as media hype (Jayasinghe 2017). He criticised the practice every year when he was co-opted by TV and radio channels to promote *avurudu* or the traditional Sinhala and Tamil New Year. Beddage observes that villages where people engage in traditional games, singing and rituals for *avurudu* simply do not exist any more; they have become mere media simulations. The chief protagonist of Amarakeerthi’s *Kurulu Hadawatha* (2013) is probably based on a currently practising electronic-media journalist who actively cultivated the image of a village farmer and became a somewhat ironic purveyor of rusticity.

Mahinda Rajapaksa, who was executive president from 2005 to 2015, at first projected a sense of rustic simplicity. Later in his political career, as he became increasingly autocratic, he took on the aura of an ancient Sinhala king. He likened himself to Dutugemunu, the warrior-king of the modern Sinhala imagination who is said to have unified the Sinhala nation. Rajapaksa’s successor, Maithripala Sirisena, also draws on notions of Sinhala authenticity. He projects an image of a *rajarata gemiya* (a villager from the *raja rata* or North Central plains). However, in terms of government policy neither of them has tried to pursue the kind of irrigation and paddy cultivation work typical of their

predecessors, such as D. S. Senanayake and J. R. Jayawardene. Neither have they put forward a specifically village-based developmental model. In fact one of the centrepieces of the Sirisena government's development strategy is the creation of a Western Province megalopolis – an unapologetically modern and urban vision of development, which is also incidentally headed by a major Sinhala nationalist ideologue, Patali Champika Ranawaka.

Post-war Sri Lanka has also seen the re-emergence of a Sinhala nationalist discourse based on the autochthonous origins of the Sinhala people. It is in some ways similar to the *hela* movement of the 1930s, but its focus is not Sinhala linguistic exceptionalism but a 4,000-year-old mytho-history in which Sri Lanka is believed to have achieved great technological advances (Witharana n.d.). It sees Sinhala people as descendants of Ravana, the demon king of the *Mahabharata* – a figure associated with many stories of ancient scientific and technological prowess. The post-war years witnessed a growing Ravana cult, newspapers and radio and TV channels providing much space for Ravana-related discussions. Witharana (n.d.) speculates that the post-war context has called for a 'better' story for the Sinhala community: a story in which Sinhala pride at having defeated the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) – a group many experts believed was militarily undefeatable – mixes with a need to dissociate Sri Lanka from India because of India's perceived meddling in Sri Lankan affairs. The Ravana cult provides a mytho-historical basis to idealise a twenty-first-century Sinhala nation with advanced technological capabilities. It is still too early to predict the course of this emergent structure of feeling. It does, however, suggest that the death of one kind of authenticity does not imply the death of authenticity itself. Authenticity has always been contested and reshaped.

The aura of authenticity

The 'life and death' of authenticity in Sinhala culture and its deep structural relationship to nationalism offer a specific case from which to reflect more generally on authenticity and its relationship to postcolonial nationalism and postcolonial criticism. Authenticity is neither simply a strategic category mobilised by nationalists nor simply a form of self-delusion. Specific contextual factors underlie its production and its political and cultural resilience. In concluding, I look at authenticity from a conceptual perspective and explore how it has shaped and continues to shape postcolonial thought.

Walter Benjamin's 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1970 [1936]) is perhaps one of the earliest critiques drawing out connections between authenticity, art, culture and politics in the twentieth century. Benjamin foregrounds the poetics and politics of what happens to art when technology creates the conditions for seamless mass reproduction. He argues that with such technological reproducibility art loses its 'aura', or a kind of authenticity that artistic objects have when they are embedded in a particular history and locale. With reproducibility they are lifted out of this context and become free-floating signifiers. This argument is not only about art or artistic perception. It is also political. Reproducibility frees the artistic object from its tradition. This is not necessarily a bad thing for Benjamin, because it creates the possibilities for making art political rather than ritualistic. However, it also creates the conditions for the commodification of art whereby people are drawn to the fake authenticity of the reproduced object in a kind of mass spectacle.

Benjamin illustrates this through film, where the audience's experience is filtered through the medium of the camera – a technologically mediated access to 'reality' where the audience 'forgets' the artifice of their experience. The film can only be aesthetically appreciated if one is not aware of all the technological paraphernalia that surrounds its production. For Benjamin this represents the aestheticisation of politics – a kind of alienating effect whereby in the modern mass consumption of culture people are drawn to the ghostly aura of authenticity that surrounds the reproduced object of art. In reality the object has already lost its authentic aura at the very moment of its reproduction. As the epilogue to 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' indicates, Benjamin was making these observations as a reaction to the efforts of European fascists to build a reified tradition based on mass spectacle and ritual.

Benjamin's reflections on the political functions of authenticity have a number of implications for postcolonial nationalism. This is best illustrated in the thinking of the Martinique-born black intellectual Frantz Fanon – often seen as a foundational figure in postcolonial studies. In *Wretched of the Earth* (2004 [1961]) Fanon proposes a typology – very similar to a Marxist teleology – for anti-colonial nationalism. In its formative stages, Fanon suggests, local intellectuals follow an imitative path, trying to emulate colonial models. In the next stage, Fanon argues, these intellectuals become more conscious of their own culture and traditions, but in doing so begin to romanticise the past without a critical consciousness of the complexities of their present. In a third and

final stage these intellectuals will lift their heads out of the past and begin engaging directly with the people and their present. What we confront in much of postcolonial nationalism is Fanon's second stage, where authenticity haunts the postcolonial imagination – both as a culture of mourning about a lost past and as a political imaginary built on the recovery and modern-day reconstruction of this authenticity.

This style of thought extends well beyond nationalist thinking. The language of authenticity is something many postcolonial studies scholars will repudiate unhesitatingly. But the belief that there is a domain of life that lies outside colonial modernity is a conceptual orientation that has had a deep and formative role in postcolonial studies. As Aamir Mufti (2000) has argued, in this type of postcolonial criticism a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' about the West, where concepts perceived to be 'Western' are critically deconstructed and their historical genealogies laid bare, is replaced with a 'hermeneutics of reclamation' in relation to things that are considered 'Eastern': criticism is supplanted by affirmation.

Authenticity in critical scholarship can take different guises and forms. At one level, scholarship implicitly and explicitly invested in nationalism seeks affirmation. Such scholarship sees as its mission the restoration of a history, subjectivity and dignity lost to the depredations of colonialism. This can range from romantic reconstructions of the past to sophisticated post-structuralist deconstructions of 'Western' knowledge. If colonial scholarship 'colonised' the non-Western world, the goal of such postcolonial scholarship is its decolonisation. There is, however, a fine line between critically rethinking 'Western' assumptions about non-Western societies and adopting a nativist stance that builds a line of defence between a perceived inside and outside – a division between 'our' scholarship and 'their' scholarship.

Given the geopolitics of knowledge production and the heavily uneven playing field in which contemporary knowledge production takes place, it is perhaps understandable why scholarly production outside first-world metropolitan centres is keenly self-conscious of its positioning – what one scholar has called 'history's waiting room' (Chakrabarty 2000). It is equally imperative that the allure of nationalist authenticity be resisted. Much non-first-world scholarship is intensely aware of the need to resist the many tyrannies associated with the nation state in the postcolonial world. However, when such postcolonial scholars confront international criticism of their own societies there is an almost involuntary movement towards nationalism – they are radically anti-nationalist at home and softly cultural nationalist on a world scale. To disentangle the historical genealogies of the many

forms of authenticity that continue to inform and shape nationalism in the present will require a critical position that can rise above such a filial relationship with the nation. To uncover authenticity's many nationalist genealogies requires an empathetic reading, a reading this book has attempted to provide, but such empathy must also be tempered by a critical spirit that rises above the deep structural allure of authenticity and the sense of filial obligation that nationalism can engender.

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'This is a refreshing contribution to the growing body of scholarly literature on Sri Lanka's Sinhalese nationalism, its politics and intellectual strands. Its value is enhanced by the marshalling of sources available in the Sinhalese language that are usually ignored in scholarly work on contemporary Sri Lanka.'

– **Professor Jayadeva Uyangoda**, formerly University of Colombo

'This is an impressive work that guides the reader with compassion through the cultural and political whirlwind of colonial and postcolonial Sri Lanka. Rambukwella breathes fresh air into old debates, probing the ironies of authenticity and inauthenticity through the lives and works of three leading nationalist thinkers. Timely and inspiring.'

– **Professor Nira Wickramasinghe**, Leiden University

What is the role of cultural authenticity in the making of nations? Much scholarly and popular commentary on nationalism dismisses authenticity as a romantic fantasy or, worse, a deliberately constructed mythology used for political manipulation. *The Politics and Poetics of Authenticity* places authenticity at the heart of Sinhala nationalism in late nineteenth and twentieth-century Sri Lanka. It argues that the passion for the 'real' or the 'authentic' has played a significant role in shaping nationalist thinking and argues for an empathetic yet critical engagement with the idea of authenticity.

Through a series of fine-grained and historically grounded analyses of the writings of individual figures central to the making of Sinhala nationalist ideology the book demonstrates authenticity's rich and varied presence in Sri Lankan public life and its key role in understanding post-colonial nationalism in Sri Lanka and elsewhere in South Asia and the world. It also explores how notions of authenticity shape certain strands of postcolonial criticism and offers a way of questioning the taken-for-granted nature of the nation as a unit of analysis but at the same time critically explore the deep imprint of nations and nationalisms on people's lives.

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