

Trading on commission in Sri Lanka's wholesale scene

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Introduction

I began negotiating the sale of my motorbike with a garage based in Colombo several months before returning to Scotland. Having spent almost two years living with market traders, observing negotiations and deals every day, I saw selling the motorbike as my opportunity to put into practice what I had learnt amongst the dusty trading stalls of Sri Lanka's largest vegetable wholesale market where I did much of my fieldwork.ⁱ It was important to me that I not only completed the sale to get as much money as I could, but that I performed the job of selling properly, which meant selling as I felt a market trader might. In an attempt to be taken seriously, I tried to appropriate some of the techniques of sale and mannerisms of commerce witnessed throughout my fieldwork.

I laid the groundwork of the sale so that I was not in the same position as the farmers were when they arrived at the market: having to sell perishable items put the farmers against the clock from the outset, weakening their bargaining position significantly. I started the sale months before I would have to actually part with the bike, to have time for negotiating and to let the garage know that there were plenty of other potential buyers. I also told the buyer at the garage that I would prefer to sell the motorbike where I lived, a junction town called Dambulla about 160km from the capital, rather than in Colombo itself. Therefore, I would only sell to the garage if the price were worth the journey. In so doing I was able to bring a measure of value to the negotiation table, over which I could have some authority – he may be an authority on price in the preowned bike market, but I can say how arduous I might find the journey.

Before we discussed the selling price we acknowledged that we had different agendas, to which each of us must be sympathetic during the trade. I expressed sympathy for the case he put forward about the cost of overheads and the problems of doing business at a time of rising taxes. He was sympathetic when I explained that as a student in a foreign country it was difficult for me to find a buyer I could trust not to try and cheat me. When it came to fixing on

a final price the register switched sharply away from the jovial conversations with which we had begun. Outlining our positions – and reasons why things may be tense during bargaining – meant that when a price was unsatisfactory our exaggerated responses of personal offence would not be a barrier to reaching a deal that might satisfy each of us. The sale involved several lengthy handshakes, which evolved into simply holding hands throughout entire conversations, and grasping at one another's arms when stating our positions; a gesture that, with the slightest drop of a shoulder, twist of the wrist or raise of an eyebrow, moved between domination and intimidation, and intimacy and friendship.

The physicality of trading spaces was something made familiar to me within the confined stalls of the Dambulla vegetable market. Doing ethnographic research in a bustling market place required not only figuring out what was going on in terms of the processes of exchange, but it was also a place I had to learn how to navigate physically. The narrow passageways, cramped stalls and constant movement of people and things created a challenging physical environment. Simply sitting in the trading stalls talking to merchants and taking notes was not enough. Being in the market meant learning about a trading culture through movement and action.ⁱⁱ Experiencing the market as a sensorial landscape, developing a corporeal and kinetic understanding of belonging in the market, meant learning how to move in tight spaces, how to physically manage men, and it required me to re-consider my own expectations of 'personal space' to be at ease with the physicality of such interactions.ⁱⁱⁱ

I spent almost two years observing and participating in the lives of traders and trading families. I was introduced to the market through the merchant family I lived with. As well as being with the traders inside the market as they sold their wares, I joined them for weddings, funerals, society meetings, and protests. In addition to a lot of hanging out, I conducted interviews with merchants, labourers, and market administrators, and surveyed the entire market.

The selling techniques I attempted to employ toward the end of my fieldwork, described above, were imitated and performed. Nevertheless, a sale was made. It required tapping into an etiquette that was recognisably different to my everyday interactions with people. Selling involved engaging generally understood notions of value, loss, cost, risk, gain, and fairness, but negotiating them with almost opposing agendas: the buyer wanted to pay less, and I wanted him to pay more. Selling allowed us to engage with one another differently. At one

level, we were more physical with one another, but at another, around the sale, we could (re)shape the very parameters of courteousness and coerciveness.

Drawing on almost two years of ethnographic research, this paper analyses moments of sale within Sri Lanka's largest wholesale vegetable market to unpack the etiquette of selling. It shows how existing social relations beyond the market are brought to bear on the moment of sale, but also, how the context of selling acts as a specific site of transmission and transposition. Teased out through the ethnographic examples are the various registers of significance in the act of selling. These involve navigating complex interpretations of trustworthiness, deceit, good heartedness, and propriety. The paper also examines metaphors of the body used to communicate correctness in the etiquette of selling and what it means to be a good salesman and a good person. Furthermore, I illustrate how Muslims in the market are thought to embody particular characteristics that make them successful salespeople, though not necessarily virtuous. Where anthropological literature on markets and merchants has drawn attention to process, meaning and order in trading spaces (Geertz 1979; Ostor 1984; Vidal 2000), this paper treats the act of selling as shot through with significance and symbolism created outside the moment of sale. The act of selling, I argue, facilitates a reformulation of these complexly understood and misunderstood social relations.

Selling is thus charged with a generative potential for new types of social possibilities. Through the act of selling traders stake out alternative forms of social interaction, reimagine their relationships, and take on ambiguous attitudes towards the ability to sell at all.

I suggest that selling invokes a particular kind of behaviour and the act of selling cultivates an environment in which people can come to consider one another on redefined terms. As Chris Gregory (2012) has pointed out in his reflections on Peebles' (2010) work on the moral distinction of credit and debt, there is something that is referred to as the market, which evokes a particular way of being and thinking, and something else, distinctly other, referred to as society (Gregory 2012: 186).^{iv} Gregory captures this distinction as 'the warmth of the caring and sharing household at one extreme and the cold, hard world of higgling and haggling with strangers in the market place at the other extreme' (Gregory 2012: 186). In a similar vein this article considers the act of selling as that which gives the market and the market transaction its character and potency. I suggest that the market is not necessarily noteworthy

in the context of its opposition to society and the home, but rather, because markets house the act of selling.

Of particular interest in this paper is that the selling is being done on commission. It focuses on commission agents, who sell on behalf of others. Specifically, commission agents sell between farmers and retail distributors. Selling on commission thus involves mediating in close confines between two unequally matched transactors: the dependent farmer and the unscrupulous buyer. It requires an act of studied indifference, performed authority over market processes and prices, embodied ethics, and the up-keep of a network of effective social relations.

The article begins by introducing the market in the context of Sri Lanka's historical trade routes, the composition of the wholesale industry and the mechanics of selling on commission. The paper then moves to analyse one of the key functions of the commission agent: the ability to 'realize a price'. Here, I argue that while command over ordinal scales impels and persuades it also works toward impersonalising the act of selling. The moral imperative for the middleman to sell and the personal stakes of not selling are exposed when the market goes into shock. Exploring the importance of a middleman in the market system and the behaviour of the middleman in the act of selling, the paper examines selling as an embodied skill captured by metaphors of the body and the characteristics of market actors. The moment of sale, this paper argues through its examples of transaction, is rich with the meaning and order of the world outside the market, but the act of selling provides a unique moment of coercion in which moral transcendental orders can be negotiated.

Dambulla, Central Sri Lanka

The market town of Dambulla is situated in the middle of the island, at a crossing point of two trunk roads built during the British colonial period (1794-1948) to dissect the island, quash dissent, and connect important cities to important ports. Dambulla lay in the path of the first commercial route undertaken by the colonial administration following suzerainty over the entire island: the road from Colombo, on the south-west coast, to the eastern port of Trincomalee (Munasinghe 2002: 12). Dambulla is also situated on the route along which the South Indian Tamil indentured labour that fuelled the plantation economy would travel to the hill country from the north. The town was a site of pilgrimage long before it became a market town, nevertheless, it was following the takeover of the Kandyan Kingdom by the British in

1815 and the consequent construction and development of military roads under colonial rule which placed Damabulla at a central cross-roads within the colonial economy of Ceylon. Population growth in the mid-20th century was part of the broader swathe of formal and informal migration to the northern dry zone that accompanied state led irrigation projects instigated in the late 1960s.

The increase in population, coupled with the new availability of lorries, transport vehicles, and credit, that came with opening the economy in the 1970s created business opportunities for rural entrepreneurs. With the arrival of mobile phones, which allowed businessmen to stay in contact with suppliers and buyers, conditions for entrepreneurship became even more advantageous, and thus Dambulla became the site of the largest wholesale vegetable market in Sri Lanka.^v For Dambulla merchants in the wholesale market, the range of commercial activity was not limited to the local market, relationships with suppliers could be established with people all over the island. Many traders moved to Dambulla and maintained connections with the farmers in the area they moved from; these farmers would then provide the merchants with produce, which they would sell-on for commission. It is the activities of commission agents who have come to prominence in the interstices of conflict and economic change by managing the sale of vegetables within this wholesale market that take centre stage here. The majority of the commission agents are Sinhala Buddhists, but there are a handful of Sinhala Christians, and ten or so stalls run by Muslims.^{vi}

The wholesale vegetable market

The wholesale vegetable market in Dambulla is the collection and sale point for approximately 60 per cent of the island's vegetables.^{vii} It is the largest market of its kind and receives around 26,500 metric tons of vegetables per week, approximately 3.7 million kilograms per day. It is also the most centrally located to service the island's vegetable needs and for many years was the only market of its kind. Up to 1200 lorries can go through the market in one day (de Silva, Ratnadiwakara and Soysa 2008:4).^{viii} It is so influential as a trading point that vegetables cultivated in the south of the island are often taken there to be sold. Following the sale through the Dambulla market they may be sent *back* to the south to be resold in smaller retail markets.

The market comprises 144 vegetable commission agent stalls, known as *kaḍēs*.^{ix} Each *kaḍē* has a team. Each team consists of approximately four people: the commission agent who is

referred to as the *mudalali* (*lit.* money person), the accountant (*liyana mahataya*), and several porters (referred to as *nāthami*, and occasionally as coolies).^x Each *kaḍē* in the market is exactly the same size as the next (approximately three meters by seven meters) and contains more or less the same equipment: a whiteboard, a set of weighing scales and a desk with a computer. Space in the *kaḍē* is left clear to store the vegetables in plastic woven sacks. There is a desk for the commission agent and the accountant that in almost all *kaḍēs* run parallel to the sidewall. Directly in front of the desk on the opposite side wall are two heavy-duty electric scales.

Selling on commission

The business of running a *kaḍē* in the wholesale market is the business of being a commission agent. Commission agents lend money to farmers for the cultivation period; recipient farmers are then obliged to sell their produce through the stall or stalls belonging to the commission agents. A commission agent's interests lie in selling the highest volume of vegetables possible, as his commission is worked out by how much weight he can mediate the sale of through his stall. To be the biggest vegetable trader and turn over the highest volume of vegetables a commission agent needs farmers to bring stock and buyers to come and take it away. Maintaining buyers and sellers involves entering into relations of credit and debt in both directions: giving loans to farmers and advancing stock to buyers. Thus, being an adept creditor (in cash or kind) is crucial for building up one's name in the business and maintaining steady trade through the stall.

Farmers start to arrive at the stalls in tractors, motorbikes, buses, lorries and three-wheels, and place their produce at the front of the stalls in the morning. The farmers' goods sit outside the stalls until the buyers start arriving shortly after this. Due to the high supply of vegetables to this particular market, the commission agents and the farmers need the buyers more than the buyers need any particular producer or merchant. If the market is 'slow', or prices are low in the wholesale market and high at retail markets in urban centres it is thought by commission agents to be because there are not enough buyers. Perhaps aware of the important role they play in the market process, buyers are often arrogant and rude. Buyers are occasionally described as *kata kāraya*, meaning they are people who work with their mouths.

Kata kāraya may be verbally skilled, but this is largely a pejorative term depicting people who appear aggressive and uncouth. This is captured by the other descriptive term for the buyer, *sarā*, which translates as spicy, but is understood to mean angry or aggressive. To be aggressive in such a manner is considered particularly un-Buddhist as it involves suffering (*duka*), an emotion that emerges from an attachment to the human world, much like lust, pride, and greed (Kapferer 1979: 3). Violence, however, is not considered anathema to the Sinhala-Buddhist ethic, as long as violence is considered 'just' (*sadharana*). Being 'just' (*sadharana*) is particularly important in business dealings, and, as I will discuss later in the paper, is an embodied skill, an ethic of exchange that becomes manifest during interactions at the moment of sale. A buyer will inspect the vegetables by poking at the bags, and often ripping them open and pouring the contents onto the floor to check the quality of produce in the centre. Buyers will look to the commission agent (not the farmer) to inquire about the price, the commission agent replies with a number and more often than not the buyer looks displeased. This exchange is often curt.

If a price per kilo is agreed, then the bags will be loaded onto the scales. It is a common trick to try and hide poor quality vegetables in the middle of a bag. A less common trick is to put stones in the bag to add weight to it. Bananas would also be placed on the scales whilst still attached to a large part of the tree they were grown on. There is high suspicion of trickery around the sale of any commodity in Sri Lanka that needs to be weighed (Kemper 2001: 188).

As this is a wholesale market, the buyer is expected to buy upward of five kilos at a time. Commission agents who don't sell a high volume can be manipulated into selling smaller weights but an established commission agent with a popular stall will not sell less than five kilos at a time. I have, however, seen a policeman buy a single kilo, and a High Court Judge seven individual limes. The farmer will get the wholesale price for the vegetables, as paid by the buyer, minus the commission that the commission agent receives for mediating the exchange. The buyer will leave the market with the vegetables and head to another market to sell. This is the simplest manifestation of the sales process.

The commission agent profits from the sale and interest on loans, and the buyer makes his money by buying as cheaply as possible at the wholesale market and selling for as dearly as possible elsewhere. However, what happens in many stalls is that when the buyer hands over money to the commission agent he is repaying what he owes for vegetables advanced to him

on a prior occasion. The farmer will get paid for the sale of his produce more or less immediately, and the stall will receive commission. Buyers are 'in debt' in the sense that they are credited an advance of produce from the commission agent which is to be repaid in cash when he returns to the market to take more produce. Here, as pointed out by Peebles, the terms 'credit' and 'debt' are in a dyadic relationship (Peebles 2010: 226), whereby, when the buyer is given the vegetables 'on credit' he is at the same time indebted to the commission agent. The moral evaluations placed on the terms 'credit' and 'debt' – credit: good, and debt: bad – discussed by Chris Gregory (2012), highlight the hierarchy between the buyer and the seller, from the position of the middle-man. At the moment of sale in the market, the buyer has credit while the seller (the farmer) has debt. When the buyer has finished 'buying' (arranging advances) he will be left with a handful of receipts given to him by the various stalls where his produce is being stored until he collects it in his lorry, barking at the porters to load the produce.

The work of the commission agent is to maintain effective social relations with both parties present, these are often cultivated through courtesy, generosity, and fear. The image of himself he needs to present at the moment of sale has two different audiences: to be persuasive he must convince the buyer and the farmer that he is acting in their interests, often whilst they're in close proximity. The commission agent is selling the livelihood of the farmers right in front of them. This performance swings from acts of hospitality to studied indifference. In this sense, the figure of the commission agent is akin to that of a diplomat figure, a fixer, a man who makes introductions. What he is selling is his authority in the market and his relationships with other market actors.

What the commission agent is selling to his buyers is his ability to supply produce, which is about reliability, and what he is simultaneously selling to his farmers is his ability to protect them from the usurious and 'spicy' itinerant trader, whom, if they were to deal with directly would almost certainly cheat them. Even the attire of the commission agent reflects the two images of himself he is presenting at the moment of sale. His sarong, slippers, and loosely buttoned shirt tacitly suggest to the farmer – I'm just like you, from the village, a guy you can trust (and indeed there is much work done outside of the market to support this image), whilst his gold jewellery and commanding managerial stance, surrounded by men (often kin – normally cross-cousins, in-laws and nephews) say to the buyer, I have connections and

influence, I can keep my farmers in check and I am not somebody that you should consider attempting to cheat, which also means that I am confident to advance you produce.

What is on display at the wholesale stall at the moment of sale is not so much the vegetables themselves, but the capability of the commission agent to be a reliable provider of credit and produce for the retailer. For vegetable commission agents, 'salesmanship' is the search for clients with whom they can build longer-term relationships, and selling affords commission agents the platform to exhibit qualities of goodheartedness (*suhadakama*), generosity, respect and trustworthiness. There is, however, a Janus-like quality to the commission agent, as they also need to be seen as influential and astute, too much benevolence could make them seem innocent (*ahinseka*). In cases where commission agents were seen *ahinseka*, or lacking influence in the market, farmers and traders were known to renege on their debts.

A merchant buys cheap and sells dear. This introduces several important components to the selling process. Firstly, price differential – the success of a sale equates to the degree of increase from the first price an item has when it is acquired, to the second price it has when it is dispensed with. Secondly, time – a commodity is bought at one time and sold at a later time. Thirdly, space, or 'territory' – an item is bought in one place and sold in another. Controlling the 'here and there' is what Chris Gregory refers to as 'territoriality as value' (Gregory: 1997: 166). Almost all of these processes, are manipulated in the context of selling as a commission agent in the Dambulla vegetable market. Commission Agents make their profit from selling at high volume rather than high margins. Commission agents also sell an item before they have bought it, and the admired skill of the vegetable commission agent is his ability to sell produce and not have to move anywhere. For the commission agent the moment of sale comes before the acquisition of the product itself. For a sale to be deemed successful, the price at which something is sold must be higher than the price of acquiring it, but how is a selling price arrived at, and what influence does naming the price command at the moment of sale?

Price realisation in theory and practice

Early on in the research a supply and demand graph was neatly drawn out in one of my notebooks by Sanjeewa, a commission agent who had completed a course in economics. Sanjeewa took my pen and drew a large 'X' on the graph indicating the point at which supply and demand intersect and the price is set. The price (*mila*) expressed in such a way is

commonly referred to by economists as the ‘market clearing price’ or the ‘equilibrium price’, but is not necessarily the price at which something is ultimately sold. There is a notional market price for a kilo of green beans (for example), and this price scrolls across the top of the web page for the Ministry of Co-operatives and Internal Trade (<http://www.trade.gov.lk/web/>) with a digital veneer of order and authority. However, actualizing the price at which beans are sold, requires the performance of authoritative knowledge of the market on the part of the commission agent. What something is actually sold for is determined within the vegetable market itself. This is referred to by market men in Dambulla as the ‘final price’ (*anthima mila*).^{xi}

Three things ostensibly determine price in the wholesale market: supply (*sāpayuma*), demand (*illumā*) (phrased in Sinhala as ‘demand and supply’), and quality.^{xii} While the quality of a product can be discussed in the market, any negotiation on quality revolves around the original ‘market price’ which is said to be set by supply and demand. Prices for vegetables are low in the market when there are few buyers relative to the number of farmers arriving with their produce. Conversely, if there are lots of buyers in the market, and relatively few farmers arriving with the supply, then demand is high and so are prices - high at the wholesale market and even higher in retail centres. On certain products the government regulator might present a ‘minimum selling price’, however, this can be undermined by the commission agent who can name the price as he sees fit. This process is what Çalışkan refers to as the complex – yet identifiable – process of ‘price realization’ (Çalışkan 2010) i.e the process through which the ‘actual price’ is ‘realised’. Following Callon (2002), Çalışkan claims that market prices are ‘prosthetic in nature; yet they are produced in specific mercantile platforms that are shaped by history of their making and the everyday forms of power contestations in these locations’ (Çalışkan 2010:118). The market regulators price is not a “real price” as the commission agents see it, but, like Çalışkan’s cotton traders, it has to be ‘deployed as a prosthesis’ (ibid 2010:118).

Jane Guyer’s *Marginal Gains* (2004) challenges the accuracy of a reductionist approach to understanding price as a reflection of supply and demand, through a discussion on the production of quality in Nigerian goods markets. Guyer claims that, in formalized economies, people have been encouraged to believe that price comes into being as a plausible outcome of a range of other scales that determine quality. Complex interval scales of quality, Guyer explains, ‘are defined and attached to the goods: How much meat has to be in various grades of sausages, and how long can fresh food items remain on the shelf before sale?’ (Guyer 2004:

83). While quality ranking is amenable to numerical calculation, such as measurements of utility and durability, goods are actually judged and validated outside the formal sector. The informal judgment of some symbolic criteria is what Çalışkan refers to as the process of 'price realization' (Çalışkan 2010). This takes place inside the vegetable stalls and is mediated by the commission agent. What lends his price authority, is his relationship to the various transactors and how connected to the complex information network of the market he appears to be.

While market prices might be seen as prosthetic, the market itself is a concrete mercantile platform on which the farmer who is indebted to the commission agent and trading on his terms cannot negotiate on price, nor can he walk home with his perishable items unsold. For this reason, some farmers don't wait in the market and simply return at the end of the day to see how much their vegetables were sold for. This is a risky strategy. They can return to find that not everything has been sold, and the cows are said to have eaten what remained. Under such circumstances, farmers can leave the market angry and often highly suspicious of the commission agent.

Price in the market, as determined by supply and demand, as I have outlined elsewhere (Heslop 2016), is a snap shot of the market as and when the buyer enquires about a particular item. There is currently no effective way to regulate what will arrive at the market, and the price of a vegetable can change with the arrival of another lorry of the same product. Thus there is an incentive for the commission agent to ensure that supply is fragmented. The quantity and variety of produce in one particular stall will change at different times of the day. Equally, at the same time of day, all of the stalls will have different quantities of different varieties of vegetables. Thus there can be discrepancies between the prices prevailing in different stalls around the market for the same product.^{xiii}

Much has been written regarding the ability of numbers to represent and influence peoples' social worlds and possibilities therein. From engineering (Harvey and Knox 2015), development policy (Mitchell 2002) and high finance (Zaloom 2006) to Marathon running (McLaughlin 2010), numbers and ordinal scales are persuasive.^{xiv} At the moment of sale, command over numbers and scales, even if performative, impels confidence and comes to stand for an authoritative and persuasive knowledge, based on the belief a commission agent is connected to the all-important communication network of the market.^{xv} Whilst the commission agent may name the price, the sale cannot all ways be achieved.

In early May 2012, I watched as a farmer laid out 350 kilos of tomatoes in wooden boxes outside a stall. The tomatoes glistened in the morning sunshine as Laxman, an experienced buyer, inspected and confirmed that the quality was good. Laxman was interested in the tomatoes and an early sale would also have been desirable to the farmer who would have his day freed up for other things. Despite Laxman wanting tomatoes, and the seller providing good quality tomatoes, a sale could not take place as the day was young and the worth of the tomatoes was still up for some speculation.

At this point no other tomatoes had arrived on the market and so demand was relatively high. If Laxman accepted the opening market price given by the commission agent he would essentially have been betting against the arrival of more tomatoes on the market in the afternoon. However, by refusing to buy the tomatoes at the high opening price, Laxman essentially lays a wager that more tomatoes will arrive on the market in the afternoon relative to the amount of people who want to buy tomatoes. Confident in his forecast and with time to kill before more produce arrives, Laxman sits on the stool provided by the commission agent, relaxes in the shade of the stall and thrusts some money into the hand of a porter and tells him to bring a cool fizzy-drink from the cafeteria. Meanwhile, the farmer waits anxiously by his tomatoes. Both keep an eye on what arrives at the market. The farmer hopes that nobody else will bring tomatoes before Laxman must leave and that more buyers will come to the market demanding tomatoes, thus increasing the value of his produce. Laxman hopes for more people selling tomatoes to arrive and for the price of tomatoes to inevitably fall. By the early afternoon there is a glut of tomatoes on the market. The farmer has waited in the heat by his tomatoes, occasionally sprinkling water on them in an attempt to make them look more enticing, while they depreciated in value. The commission agent remained seated throughout, he makes no obvious attempt to sell the tomatoes, but hosts the buyer in his stall. He knows he can't push him on the price, as tomatoes flood the market, but through his hospitality can make sure that when the buyer buys at whatever price prevails that day, he will buy them from his stall. Laxman's gamble has seen him leave the market paying less than half of the morning opening price.

There is a popular misconception held by government regulators, agricultural development professionals and urban consumers that farmers get 'tricked' by middlemen because they are simply ignorant of the 'correct' price for a vegetable. This concept has led to the invention of

price checking gadgetry such as GGS, Govi Gnana Service (farmer knowledge service) designed to give farmers a better idea of what the vegetable prices should be (de Silva 2004). Without enforcing a national level agricultural policy to fix vegetable prices, it matters very little what the farmer knows about prices elsewhere, as the terms of trade are decided on the day he comes to sell his produce in the stall he is obliged to sell through. Much like Çalişkan's cotton traders who would never be able to trade at the world market price, farmers in the Dambulla market would not get very far by quoting the 'farmer knowledge service' or the website for the Ministry of Co-operatives and Internal Trade when they want to sell.

Before the market closed for two days over a religious holiday in June 2012 (Poson Poya) hundreds of farmers turned up, desperate to sell their tomatoes which would otherwise rot by the time the market re-opened. The glut of supply became noticeable as early as 10 a.m. I stood with Chaminda in his stall, Jayanthi Traders, watching as the shop fronts became covered in tomatoes. He was worried. One of his workers was on the phone making calls, instructing farmers to come a little later and to tell buyers to come soon. By the afternoon, tomato prices had dropped to Rs.5 per kilo. By the end of the day some stalls were selling '*petiya-petiya*', a slang term that means by the box; this equates to about Rs. 3 per kilo. When the market reopened three days later we were told that because they could not sell their produce profitably two farmers from the nearby town of Matale had committed suicide. In this tragic instance, the commission agents had failed to sell the farmers' produce.

Indifference to whether produce is sold, displayed by commission agents during the sale to perform some sort of neutrality, began to look particularly false when the market went into shock and they realised they couldn't sell the volumes of vegetables that began to mount on their shop fronts. There was, I felt, a genuine sense of sorrow and regret about what had transpired. Following the farmer suicides, although indifference remained performed, it was difficult not to see selling as almost a moral obligation for many commission agents, as not to sell could be perilous.

The importance of a middleman

Buyers were often perceived and portrayed by commission agents as risk takers.

Buyers took on the jeopardy of owning stock and selling it on for a mark-up profit. As soon as the vegetables are purchased the buyers become sellers; they own the stock, they bear the cost of getting it to the next market, and they suffer the loss from any damage incurred on

route. To be successful, buyers needed to protect both their stock and their access to the market; this can at times involve the use of violence. Danger, daring, and the threat of violence can be, as de Montoya has suggested in South America, 'part of the aura of the trader's public persona' (de Montoya 73: 1999). I was told by one of the commission agents that several years ago a foreigner helped a farmer organise a direct line of supply of tomatoes to a five-star hotel in the area. The deal gave the farmer a better selling price and the hotel a better buying price by cutting out the market traders. However, this came to an end when the lorry was stopped on route to the hotel, the produce was destroyed and the driver was beaten up.

Farmers receive the lowest selling price for their produce, and as they sell through the commission stalls they are, in a sense, also paying for the privilege of doing so. On top of this, farmers are burdened by an interest-laden loan for the cultivation period, which is often a large sum for them. The lure of the wholesale market to the farmer is that he can potentially sell a larger volume of his cash crops. Although the farmer may receive a lower return per unit, his net income will be higher because of the increase in volume. However, the fact that the commission agent gives the money to cultivate is a significant factor that binds farmers to the market. This is not always considered a bad thing, as getting one's product to the largest market by trading through a commission agent is also a matter of seeking out a patron. This, as commission agents suggest, offers some sort of protection from buyers as well as access to money, even if this means losing out on obtaining a 'fair' price. The need for a mediator permeates a broad range of activities in Sri Lankan social life.^{xvi} The task of selling in the market is not simply to maximise the volume of sales, but to sell oneself as a protector, a sponsor/benefactor (*anuśāsaka*), a creditor, and a fixer.^{xvii}

Stories about unscrupulous and dangerous buyers emphasize the need for farmers to sell their produce through commission agents, who can purportedly help protect farmers from such traders, who may cheat them should they attempted to sell directly. At the same time, if farmers attempted to take their produce straight to market, like the farmer who tried to sell tomatoes to the hotel, they might run the risk of clashing with the traders' interests. The commission that the agent receives by selling the goods through his stall has been explained to me by several commission agents as a kind of fee for introducing the buyer to the seller. Here, the stall presents a complicated site of hospitality in which the commission agent attempts to accommodate the interests of the buyer and the seller, being simultaneously patron and client. There were however, few 'explosive moments of hospitality' (Marsden

2012: 127). Any action following a bad deal for the farmer, often suicide, would be undertaken privately. Part of managing the sale, is a performance of indifference that exudes patience.

The seemingly calm demeanour and patience of the commission agent was particularly noticeable one afternoon when a young Sinhalese Buddhist trader postured in an aggressive (*sarā*) and threatening manner inside a stall owned by Muslim potato dealers. The trader strutted around the stall bragging to his potato suppliers how he had narrowly lost in a local election in the south, an area well reputed for violence in politics and commerce, even by Sri Lankan standards (Hughes 2013, Alexander 1979). The Muslim commission agent, who wanted the business, tolerated the performance until the trader left having bought the potatoes. It was a charged theatrical scene and at times was awkwardly tense. The Buddhist trader held court in the middle of the stall, his voice had a sharp rasp, the sort popular among politicians, and his hands were on his hips helping to fill the space. The Muslim wholesalers remained seated, listened patiently, and smiled nervously waiting for him to accept the price.^{xviii} The southern trader was later described by the Muslim commission agents as thuggish (*rasthiyādu wagē*) and referred to sarcastically as 'wise' (*paṇḍita*). Elsewhere in the market, the same trader was described as an uncouth '*kata kāraya*' (a person who works with his mouth) who lacked cordiality.

Within the market, cordiality was enacted through displays of generosity, hospitality and humility, understood as good heartedness (*suhadakama*). According to the commission agents, *suhadakama* involves, among other things, conducting honest dealings and refraining from stealing, lying and deception (*hora, boru, wancha*). As it was put to me by a young market trader, with earnest and almost humorous emphasis, 'we do *try* not to cheat people'. To be capable of good hearted deeds, one should know one's own heart and mind, in that, a person should possess *hithawathkama* (loosely translated as a kind of oneness of heart and mind). This, as Nireka Weeratunge has explained elsewhere, is considered a particularly Buddhist trait (Weeratunge 341: 2010). A seller who has *hithuwathkama* is thought able to 'win the heart' (*hitha dināgenima*) of their customer, bringing about a sale. To 'win the heart' of a customer is to gain trust (*visvāsya*), the very stuff of good business. However, not *all* ostensibly good hearted qualities are perceived as genuine and therefore cannot necessarily be trusted.

Take for example the tolerance and patience shown by the Muslim commission agent in the face of a thuggish trader from the south mentioned previously. This act of patience, from the perspective of more cynical Sinhala traders, was considered disingenuous. Although, as Weeratunge claims, patience and tolerance are traits often specifically attributed to Muslims

(2010: 341), this does not equate to the same register of 'good heartedness', as it is undermined by another trait attributed to Muslims in Sri Lanka: cunning (*kapati*). Notions of the deceptive 'Mohamedan trader' featured in the oratory of 19th century Sinhala ideologue Anagarika Dharmapala, and were re-hashed with renewed vigor in the nationalist rhetoric of the mid 20th century (see Kemper 2015). The characterization of Muslims as cunning and exploitative traders who will cheat the naïve Sinhala farmer, is also a recurring trope in Sri Lankan fiction and film.^{xix} This characterization is powerfully embedded in the Sinhala popular imagination. Indeed, among the Sinhala merchants I spoke to regarding this interaction, the calm demeanour of the Muslim commission agent during the sale was not read as positive trait of tolerance, but as a false or strategic patience, an act of cunning and deception.

This scene in the moment of sale could also be considered in the context of a surge of ethno-religious nationalism following the end of the civil war (CPA 2013). In which, Muslims became the focus of animosity from quarters of the Sinhala-Buddhist community (see Haniffa 2015, Heslop2014). Here, deference, or at least keeping a low profile, might well be expected, as the moment of sale is shot through with the ethno-religious politics of the world beyond it.

Selling as an embodied skill is captured in part by the metaphors of the body mobilised to understand how one should ideally conduct a sale. Winning hearts, and a 'oneness' of the heart and mind is mapped on to Buddhist notions of propriety. Aggressively working with the mouth (*kata kāraya*), an act associated with desire and greed (Kapferer 1979: 3) is anathema to such propriety. In the case of the Muslim trader, the notion that traders' qualities, or "trading instincts" are essentially 'Muslim', comes from the myth that Muslims in Sri Lanka are a community of traders. According to Qadri Ismail, the myth of Muslims as a 'business community' is produced in no small part by the Muslim elite in Sri Lanka (Ismail 1995: 77).^{xx} Traits considered well matched for trade, both those positively valued such as patience and tolerance, and those negatively viewed such as cunning, a 'lack of shame' or concern for status (Weeratunge 342 :2010) were attributed to Muslim bodies and thought to be heritable through Muslim communities.

Conclusion

I will conclude with a conversation that took place in a vegetable stall early on in my fieldwork:

'Five lakhs and a mobile phone', Prasana said, 'if you want to be a vegetable trader, that's all you need, five lakhs and a mobile phone. You should do it'.^{xxi} 'But...' I replied, trying to politely side-step what I felt would be a costly disaster, 'I don't know anything about vegetables'. Prasana communicated with a single shrug of his shoulders the relatively peripheral value of such specific product-knowledge to the broader scheme of being a merchant. He repeated his vegetable business recruitment mantra, 'five lakhs and a mobile phone, I'm telling you that is all you need'. Kitsiri, who had been listening to our conversation while rummaging through a sack of green beans, joined in, 'You want to be a vegetable trader?' I was annoyed by Kitsiri's tone, and the emphatic '*you*', with which he demonstrated his incredulity at my aptitude as a vegetable merchant. I immediately switched from being Prasana's reluctant recruit to telling Kitsiri that I was, in fact, going into the vegetable business. When Kitsiri finished laughing, he said, 'within one week you will have lost all five lakhs *and* your mobile phone!'

I did not go into business as a vegetable trader. The conversation at the stall is playful, yet at the same time demonstrates the confidence with which merchants would display their knowledge of how the market works, who can be successful, and the ease with which somebody can be tricked into entering a game they cannot win. The conversation hints at the double-games at work in the world of selling: Prasana's kind encouragement may have masked what he saw as an opportunity for personal gain; Kitsiri's ridicule seems kinder than it might first appear, if we are to read it as a caution. The emphatic '*you*' also reveals that who you are matters more than what you do when selling on commission in the market. Regardless of what I might know about vegetables, Prasana and Kitsiri were sure I would lose my shirt if I attempted to start a business.

This conversation, as well as the vignette with which this article began, also speaks to the role of performance in selling and the subjectivity of the trader in the act of selling. The mannerisms of commerce I adopted toward the end of my fieldwork when selling the bike, were imitated and performed, and open to be read as disingenuous. I imagine my performance in the Colombo garage was written off by the motorbike dealer as a slightly odd but fairly innocuous anomaly in his day - when a foreigner, speaking Sinhala with a village accent, attempted to do a deal like a rural merchant. In the market however, amongst the traders and the commission agents, a performance deemed disingenuous had a more sinister reading. As shown by the interaction between the Muslim commission agent and the Sinhala

trader during the potato sale, and the way that was later interpreted by other traders I spoke with, the otherwise positively valued characteristics of selling, those of deference and patience, were seen as strategy and cunning when performed by Muslim commission agents.

Of further importance in this essay, is that the sellers are selling on commission and not parting with produce they own. Selling on commission, I have shown, involves mediating in close confines between two unequally matched transactors: the dependent farmer and the unscrupulous buyer. The 'big sell' is for the commission agent to instil confidence in both. This is done through an act of studied indifference, performed authority over market processes and prices, embodied ethics, and the up-keep of a network of effective social relations. A description of a breakdown in the market, the tomato glut, revealed how commission agents find themselves less influential over the market than they profess to be, and far less indifferent to the fate of the farmers than they claim to be when selling their produce. At the moment of sale, command over numbers and scales, even if performative, impels confidence and comes to stand for an authoritative and persuasive knowledge, based on the belief a commission agent is connected to the all-important communication network of the market.

Things in the market are rarely as they seem. This essay (and this issue) suggests that the sale is a moment of coercion unique but not detached from other types of social interaction. Selling provides an arena in which notions of what could be considered 'ethical' come into correspondence. The putative meaning and order of the world outside the market seeps into the moment of sale, infused with ideas about religiosity, ethnicity, piety, masculinity and civic duty. The significance of these transcendental moral orders rises and falls dynamically as the sale unfolds, they are mingled in the performances of selling, the etiquette of salesmanship, and the double-games that characterise market life.

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<http://www.trade.gov.lk/web/> - accessed on 20.04.2014

ⁱ This article is based upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Sri Lanka between November 2010 and September 2012. The research involved participant observation, surveys, and recorded interviews with traders. The research was funded by The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

ⁱⁱ The importance of physical interaction in understanding a market place that requires moving bodies and moving with bodies, is consonant with Timothy Landry's remarks on physicality in his attempt to learn Haitian Vodou (Landry 2008). Whereby culture, is something that can be learnt through movement and action (Landry 2008: 53).

ⁱⁱⁱ In a similar way Loïc Waquant talks of the experience of boxing being a 'kinetic culture', 'intensely corporeal', and a 'universe in which the most essential is transmitted acquired, and deployed beneath language and consciousness' (Waquant 2004: xi); learning to move and carry oneself in the market place, and in particular during a moment of sale, was a skill that sits beneath the skin, difficult to describe.

^{iv} In a similar vein, Çalişkan (2010) states that, 'Whether their [the researcher's] goal is to locate the rational individual or the embedded market or the embedded institution, they are certain to find a universalised understanding of a "society" and an "economy"' (Çalişkan 2010: 05).

^v <http://www.trade.gov.lk/web/> - accessed on 20.04.2014

^{vi} There is only one female vendor, she works with her husband and does not feature in the data presented here.

^{vii} <http://www.trade.gov.lk/web/> - accessed on 20.04.2014

^{viii} This is the most recent figure I can find but it is likely to be much higher than this now.

^{ix} The term *kaçē* is used as shorthand throughout Sri Lanka for any kind of shop, for ease in this paper, I will simply use the term, stall.

^x Occasionally porters will refer to themselves as *nathāmi*, but this and the term 'coolie', or in Sinhala' *kuli vāda*, which means wage labourer, held derogatory connotations. I will use the English word porter throughout.

^{xi} The final price that something is sold for is referred to by economists as the 'price prevailing'.

^{xii} The English word 'quality' was commonly used by the traders, normally suffixed by the Sinhala word *madi* (not enough) to indicate that there is not enough quality.

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- ^{xiii} For more on how price differentials can be exploited by certain operators within the market see (Heslop 2016)
- ^{xiv} See Jane Guyer's (2010) special issue, 'Number as Inventive Frontier' *Anthropological Theory*.
- ^{xv} See Heslop (2016).
- ^{xvi} In particular, any interaction with a government office or the police is done through a mediator, often a family connection who might work or know somebody that works in the required department.
- ^{xvii} *Anuśāsaka* can also be a godfather type figure as well.
- ^{xviii} Pricing potatoes imported from China and Pakistan works slightly differently in the market, as they have better knowledge of their supply. In this instance the buyer cannot wait for a glut as he may for tomatoes.
- ^{xix} In Sinhala language film and literature Muslims are also portrayed as opportunistic and lecherous, see *Maagam Soliya* by Mohan Raj Madawala (2013), *Kurulu Hadawatha* by Liyanage Amara Keethi (2014) and *Suddilage Kathawa* by Simon Nawagattegama (1984).
- ^{xx} Mohamed Mauroof has argued the case for 'three 'ideal-types' of Muslim trader: the gem trader, the urban entrepreneur and the village boutique keeper' (Ismail 1995: 77).
- ^{xxi} A lakh is a unit in the South Asian measuring system equal to one hundred thousand.