Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History

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How is ethnic and patriotic sentiment manufactured in the face of the ceaseless absorption of the foreign? Historians have often reminded us of the latter in order to puncture the delusions that balloon around the former; an irresistible manoeuvre. Following suit, we might start with the image of Kandy in the national consciousness of the Sinhalese, as the highland region where indigenous sovereignty held out for the longest time against European colonialism. To be ‘KGB’ (Kandyan Goyigama Buddhist) is still to signify a lofty purity in terms of ethnicity, caste and religion. But when Kandy was re-established in the 1590s it was under the leadership of a man by the name of Dom João de Áustria. He was a lascarin captain in the Portuguese army, his wife was a Portuguese orphan, and he was named after the great hero of the battle of Lepanto, a Catholic victory against Ottomans. After he attained the throne, a Dutch visitor to his court noted the extent to which the aesthetic and domestic spheres were influenced by a taste for all things Portuguese.

Yet it will not do to dwell for too long on this irony. It is no less important to note that in order for Dom João de Áustria to ascend the throne he had to become ‘Vimaladharmasūriya I’: he had to apostatize in a very conspicuous way, building a new Temple of the Tooth to house the Buddha’s Tooth Relic, ejecting the Portuguese, forcing prisoners to apostatize, and patronizing the Sangha. This chapter is therefore as concerned with the limits to ‘cosmopolitanism’ – as a phenomenon and as a concept – as it is with its operation. If the potency of the foreign is sought after, it is usually domesticated in the process: this is the digestion of the foreign. In seeking to explain and underline this point, this chapter proceeds in the footsteps of Gananath Obeyesekere and Stanley Tambiah. However, since their explorations of the processes of Sinhalacization and Buddhicization, historiography has undertaken a now discernible ‘global turn’. This is reflected here not by establishing new historical connections, but by scrutinizing interpretations in the light of new historical comparisons.
A second organizing question for this chapter is therefore whether even to speak of ‘ethnic and patriotic sentiment’ outside of the West before the modern period is to lapse into parochialism. The first part answers this by examining how awkwardly Sri Lanka fits into Sheldon Pollock’s theory of the contrasting developments of group identity in South Asia and Europe. Medieval Europe is thus the reference point here, implicitly or explicitly. The second part aims to deepen our appreciation of the complex and paradoxical ways in which societies view the identity of their ruling dynasties. This involves considering how two different understandings of ‘stranger-kingship’ may be applied to Lankan history: a Sahlinsian model, and a political theory model. The final part is chronologically comparative, bringing together ways in which Lankan society responded to the imperial threat from the Portuguese and early British periods. In particular it focuses on a grammar of rebellion that seems to persist throughout. Readers should note that each of these three sections has a quite distinct focus. However, underlying them all is a common concern with the themes of Sinhalaness, the ambivalence of monarchical identity and the way that the sacred interacts with political projects and violence.

A blot on the landscape? Sinhala group emotions and the Sanskrit cosmopolis

Sheldon Pollock’s analysis of a millennium (c. 500–1500) of South and Southeast Asian history, in his The Language of the Gods in the World of Men, adopts the kind of genuinely panoramic comparative sensibility of world history at its best. Theoretical reflection on identity formation has usually focused on the modern period in which the influence of Western power and ideas bulks large; there have been few serious attempts to compare how different cultural regions may have construed group identity in the premodern world. Pollock’s approach is particularly notable for the attempt to avoid the redeployment of concepts lifted semi-consciously from European history. It is only when a work such as this appears that we realize how much scholarship has lacked the conceptual rigour provided by the comparative method.

Pollock describes the Indic world in terms of a Sanskrit cosmopolis (a ‘trans-regional culture-power sphere of Sanskrit’) and then shows how, from the turn of the millennium, in region after region, this gave way to the development of vernacular literature. These new literary cultures were deeply influenced by or even modelled on the Sanskrit inheritance, but they were now turned inwards to address a more local audience in its own language. Pollock draws a striking parallel with the chronology of an equivalent process in Europe’s turn from Latin to the vernacular. However, Pollock argues that vernacularization did not carry the same political and social implications in the Indic world: it did not represent the first steps in a journey towards nations, or even ethnic groups, but was rather the occasion for the development of ‘vernacular polities’.
It should be noted at the outset that there is some ambiguity in The Language of the Gods as to how far Sri Lanka is to be understood as a participant in the dynamics that shape the trajectory of the Sanskrit cosmopolis. Pollock recognizes that Sinhala has its deepest origins as a written language as far back as the centuries BCE, and more importantly that Sri Lanka also participated in the Pāli ecumene, such that ‘Sanskrit may never have occupied a dominant position in either aesthetic or political expression’. We shall return to this point. Nevertheless, Pollock notes that the transformations in Sinhala literary culture from the end of the first millennium bear a strong resemblance to developments elsewhere. As a result, he refers to these developments a number of times, where they are depicted as an unusually early case of his central thesis – particularly exemplified in the ninth-century Siyabaslakara. Moreover, presumably Pollock’s many generalizations about the functioning of identity in ‘South Asia’ or the cosmopolis more widely are intended to include Sri Lanka.

One such insight is the way that the vernacular polity produces a distinctly bounded concept of its proper arena, so that we see in Lanka for the first time in the tenth and more strongly the twelfth centuries, ‘the earliest literary representations… of a newly coherent geocultural space’. The language of universal sovereignty appropriate for the old cosmopolis may still linger on in a symbolic form (so that a king is hailed as cakravarti with Jambudīpa-wide hegemony), but this is understood to refer in actuality to an identified territory. Java presents an interesting comparison with Sri Lanka in this regard. We need not thereby underplay the extent to which Lankan kings looked to extend their influence into South India and even Southeast Asia whenever they were strong enough. Yet Lankan kings rarely were strong enough to launch and sustain such projects; they never sought lasting dominion overseas.

While this may indeed be comparable with developments in Europe, it is also true that in other ways the Lankan political imagination seems firmly branded with a certain ‘cosmopolitan’ quality found in societies across the wider Indic world. In terms of its religious self-fashioning, Lankan kingship could afford to be much more eclectic and flexible than its Christian counterparts, borrowing extensively from different Buddhist traditions as well as those now considered ‘Hindu’. The latter included notions of divine kingship that rendered the king ‘as a type of axis mundi cum avatar’. Brahmans – as indeed across the Indic world – played the primary role in conducting the ritual life of the court. In this way, Sinhala kings could speak to their dynastic rivals across the seas and co-opt their claims to sacralized authority.

Indeed, if sovereignty was considered as geographically confined, it was not therefore culturally circumscribed, for the island itself was home to diverse groups. A claim to rule over Lanka entailed dominion over the Tamil-speaking parts of the north and the east, over the vāḍḍa of the interior, and over the mercantile and fishing groups of diverse origins strung along the coasts, as well as over the Sinhala-speaking population. Nor was such diversity simply an uncomfortable fact, but rather something that flattered the authority of the king or
cakravarti. To that extent, a cosmopolitan or ‘universalist’ notion of kingship remained. In keeping with this general celebration of pluriomnity, mastery over several languages remained an ideal for scholars – indeed for kings – well into the vernacular period and beyond. By the time that the Portuguese arrived then in the first years of the sixteenth century, they found an elite culture that looked anything but monolithic. The kings of Kōṭṭe were dependent on quite recently arrived mercenaries from South India, and tried to tempt Karāvas to settle with land grants. Bhuvanekabāhu VII (1521–51), the last king or ‘emperor’ of Kōṭṭe to resist Portuguese control, signed his letters with a phrase in Tamil. Nor was the ‘digestion of the foreign’ always a bargain premised on cultural assimilation: hence Muslims could be incorporated into the Kandyan socio-political order in a way that was both profound and tolerant of their faith.

It is always salutary to remind ourselves of these facts, and careful analysis with Europe may indeed reveal some of these features to be rather distinctive of a South Asian or even Indic sensibility. Other features, however, may turn out to be applicable to premodern politics more generally, only acquiring any contrastive analytical relevance when set against some more modern visions of the nation-state. For example, Britain in the period 1110–1400 ce would present an analogous example of an island populated by a number of distinct peoples according to their own self-understandings, and yet according to R. R. Davies, ‘it was considered a sign of political maturity and power that a ruler governed several peoples rather than one’, with rulers from Athelstan (r. 925–39) onwards granting themselves grandiloquent imperial titles as a result.

But what might all this mean for the possibility of ethnicity or even politicized ethnicity? Pollock’s stance here is radically different to that of the modernization theorists for whom the basic conditions of life in the premodern period everywhere rendered national sentiments or even politicized ethnicity impossible or superficial. Rather than being held to be dependent on a certain stage in material and political development, Pollock holds the existence of such sentiments to depend essentially on a cultural matrix of remarkable longevity. Hence they may be a foundational element of European life from very early on and yet irrelevant to the Indic world. For, as he sees it, ‘ethnic fictions’ or origin stories simply found no foothold in the Sanskrit imagination. Genealogy may have been a crucial element of dynastic aggrandizement, but we find no explicit discourses on the origins of peoples, they did not become the subject of chronicles as they did in Europe, and ‘one is hard-pressed to identify a single instance of the propagation of shared group memories’. Of the premodern Indian texts that have been read, nowhere is it possible to point to a discourse that links language, identity, and polity; in other words, nowhere does ethnicity – which for purposes of discussion we may define as the political salience of kin group sentiment – find even faint expression. It is equally impossible to locate evidence in South Asia for the linkage of blood and tongue so common in medieval Europe, or for cultures as associations restricted by so-called primordial ties.
This definition of ethnicity places a lot of weight on ‘fictive kinship’, and in one sense this is productive for comparative purposes. It serves to highlight what may well be a significant breach between the Indic and European. According to Davies, myths of biological descent were ‘the veriest commonplaces of the historical mythology of the medieval world’. In an emic sense, peoples were communities of common descent. For John Watts, by the fourteenth century in Europe more generally, ‘the hallmarks of nationhood were conventionally the ties of blood and language, though a common name, shared laws and customs, government and territory… were also often important’. In the surviving source material from Sri Lanka, on the other hand, the dynasty greatly overshadows any role taken by ‘the people’, and the question of the blood descent of the linguistic group had much less salience. In general, the sandēśa poems, and even the ḍana (for example, the Sitāvaka ḍana) seem more concerned with exalting royal lineages and the island itself rather than the Sinhala people in an explicit sense. It is reasonable to suppose that the caste system, with its foundation in endogamy, presented an obstacle to larger group claims based on fictive kinship across South Asia – even if caste worked quite differently in Sri Lanka to many parts of India.

In other ways, however, the definition obstructs comparative insight. ‘Peoplehood’ may be imagined in a variety of ways: to make explicit claims about common descent a necessary feature of it is to foreclose too quickly on broadly comparable dynamics of group sentiment. For example, however much descent claims may feature in emic understandings of ethnicity in medieval Britain, Davies does not ultimately make it a necessary feature of his etic definition of peoplehood. Instead his definition is that of an imagined community – imagined by itself and/or by others. This has much in common with Obeyesekere’s richer notion of the ‘ethnic moral community’. Two other points emerge from Davies’ analysis that will be helpful for us as we proceed: that the formation of ethnicity is not dependent on a single cohesive state structure; and that its subjective and often taken-for-granted qualities mean that it is not a phenomenon that implants itself in the historical record in a straightforward way. It is ‘alternatively a prominent and a strangely evanescent concept’.

Nevertheless, over the course of Pollock’s millennium, there is certainly evidence in the Lankan record for many of the features that are typically associated with ethnicity. Notwithstanding the suggestion that blood had a rather weak salience in expressions of Sinhalaness, it may be that the famous origin story for the Sinhalas was in fact taken as such a descent claim for most or all of its very long history. The story of Sīhabāhu and Vijaya – itself probably an amalgamation of various such origin stories – is present in its extended form in the Mahāvamsa of the late fifth or early sixth century ce. It describes the fortunes of the miscreant Vijaya, descended from a lion, who pitched up in Lanka and overcame the yakṣhini Kuvenī. It was retold many times in both Pāli and Sinhala texts. It has, to be sure, been a source of much debate as to whether the Sinhalas of the Mahāvamsa narrative can be understood as a dynasty or a people. Yet, the likelihood is that these stories were already taken as describing the origin of a far broader group than a
dynasty at the time the Mahāvamsa was composed. Vijaya arrives on the island, with 700 warriors, to find it uninhabited by humans but only by yakkhas: this is clearly a colonization myth. Rather intriguingly, the logic deployed here follows that of many other ‘stranger-king’ stories across the world, which are usually taken to define the origin of both kingship and society tout court.

The question as to whether and when Sinhalaness went from being an elite/dynastic category to one that encompassed all Sinhala-speakers stimulated an academic controversy in the 1980s and 1990s between K. N. O. Dharmadasa (who argued for an early emergence, by the tenth century at least) and R. A. L. H. Gunawardana (who argued for an initial emergence in the twelfth century but remaining muted until the nineteenth century). For our purposes, however, it is significant that both argue for an initial crystallization either before or within Pollock’s vernacularization period. One text that became the focus of debate is dated to the tenth century, the Dhampiyā atuvā gātapadaya, which was apparently written by the king Kassapa V (914–23) – and therefore has as great a claim as any to represent the ‘public transcript’ of communal origination. Gunawardana gives the following translation of a critical excerpt (in which ‘helu’ is used as a synonym for Sinhala):

How is (the term) in the helu language derived? That is derived on account of residents in the island being helu. How is it that (they) are (called) hela? Having killed a lion, King Sihabāhu was called Sīhaḷa (as in the Pāli phrase), ‘Sīhaḷa, on account of having cut (or killed) a (or the) lion.’ On account of being his progeny (ohu daru bävin), Prince Vida (Vijaya) was called Sīhaḷa. Others came to be called Sīhaḷa on account of being their retinue (ehuvu pirivara bävin).

Gunawardana notes that this is an inelegant translation because the exact meanings matter for his debate with Dharmadasa. Yet for all that Gunawardana wanted to push forward the salience of ethnic identity as late as possible, it seems clear that a significant group of residents of the island were known as Sinhalas by this time. Gunawardana argued that this group pertained to the ‘kulīna’ or ruling stratum, and that the lower classes were excluded from this group – but this element of the argument is not particularly compelling.

Either way, this does not sit easily with Pollock’s characterization of an Indic system in which ‘the names for the vernaculars seem to abstract them from the domain of the group and locate them in what almost seem ecospheres… we must conclude it was far more often region that made a language (and a people) than the reverse’. For what do we have in the Dhampiyā atuvā gātapadaya right at the beginnings of the vernacular turn? Yes, the name of the language derives from the land, but that in turn derives from residents of the land, who had taken their name from the lion-natured founding figures Sihabāhu and Vijaya… The flow of causality in the development of identity described by this and later texts such as the twelfth-century Dharmapradīpikā are scholarly reflections and may or
may not reflect what happened historically. The more significant point is that by this time, the land, heroic founding figures, the residents of the land and the language were all profoundly identified with each other and grouped under the same name. And that it was considered to be a matter of some significance to the highest elites how the name for the wider Sinhala group evolved and could be defined.

In fact, a lineage-based understanding may have been current much earlier than this (perhaps a century or so after the composition of the *Mahāvamsa*) to judge from the version of the Sīhābāhu story relayed by the Chinese traveler Xuanzang, which he must have heard from Lankan monks who had come to India. It says that after the founder arrived to the island and tricked his way to power, he propagated and reproduced, and because his offspring became numerous they divided into classes and elected a king and ministers. The men of the ‘Lion State’ (*shizi guo*) are described in racial terms, possessing certain physical and psychological characteristics as a result of their ancestry from a lion. This may well reflect a strand of Chinese racial ethnology, but Xuanzang, at least, understood the Sinhala origin story as a descent claim – and for a whole society (note that all classes are held to be descended from the lion-fathered founder).

Indeed, there is surely an opportunity for drawing more on foreign deployments of the term ‘Sinhala’ from this period into our analysis. Furthermore, even Gunawardana saw the period of Cōḷa occupation in the tenth to eleventh centuries as providing the conditions for an ‘archaic ethnicity’ (that is, one sensed by sections of the elite and literati). In his view, the crucial shift to an inclusive definition of ‘Sinhala’ had happened by the reign of Parākramabāhu I’s successor, Niśānkaṁalla (1187–96). The Cōḷas certainly provided the Sinhala kingdoms with more than enough alterity through which to fashion a contrasting image of themselves. Sinhala texts of the thirteenth century, such as the *Pūjāvaliya*, show the lasting impact of these conflicts in inflaming identity politics. But the truth is that these texts were merely redeploying a discourse of alterity already formed in the Pāḷi *vamsas*. This sense of opposition to a ‘demāḷa’ foe has become a shared understanding, expressed and reinforced through more particular shared memories of particular wars and battles, as registered in a range of texts in different languages with different purposes.

It is worth pausing here to underline that of course Tamils or demāḷas are not only demonized in the Pāḷi and Sinhala texts; they are present in them in a number of ways. This is to be expected: near ‘outsiders’ usually play several roles in the reproduction of domestic society; they are allies, marriage partners, ritual specialists and more. This multivalency of the foreign is a theme that runs through Gananath Obeyesekere’s work, and is also pursued in Marshall Sahlins’ recent theories of the stranger-king: it is a key theme of this volume too.

When the Portuguese and Dutch began to produce more ethnological material about Sri Lanka in the seventeenth century, what they report is not at all at odds with what we have gathered from these clues in the Sinhala and Pāḷi texts. The European writers are quite clear that the Sīhābāhu-Vijaya narrative is an origin story for the whole people. Interestingly, this is not the only origin
story they relate (‘and as all nations seek to glorify their origin, and the heathen almost always imagine fabulous ones’), which indicates both that the vamsa narrative was not the only source of self-understanding and that there was a continuing need on the part of the Sinhalas and their neighbours to create stories to explain where they and their name came from.58 Much more could be said in this vein – reflecting on the profound historical consciousness of the Sinhala texts for example – but we must move on.59 Charles Hallisey has suggested that:

the very period in which we see Sinhala fully realized as a literary language – that is, around the turn of the millennium – was also the time that use of the term ‘Sinhala’ was extended… to the general population and their language.60

If so, it would make sense to see this in the context of the first major unification of the island under the Okkākas in the tenth century.61 Land, language, people and polity all seem to be subject to a project of conceptual solidification and reorganization. What about religion? Again, in Pollock’s analysis this realm of life is afforded only a strangely attenuated connection to both political and aesthetic projects. Again, for Sri Lanka, this makes little sense.

That a certain religious cosmopolitanism should emerge as a major characteristic of the Indic world – and one that distinguishes it in enduring and profound ways from Europe – will be a surprise to no one. Ultimately its roots must lie not in a particular quality of Sanskrit or its literary development, but in the basic nature of the ideas developed in the formative period for South Asian religious and philosophical thought. Here the salvationist or transcendentalist urge was not initially expressed in a monotheistic devotion to a jealous god, and a given path to salvation could co-exist with all manner of projects of truth-seeking or attempts to access divine power for earthly purposes. Pollock goes further, however, to argue that there was nothing in India comparable to the Providential charter some poets and stoic thinkers provided for the Roman Empire, and he presumably has in mind the ubiquitous and long-lasting theme of Christian Providentialism too.62 In India, by contrast the supreme deity was simply ‘irrelevant as a source of royal authority. A talismanic or apotropaic force? Yes. But a granter of heavenly mandate, a justifier of rule, a transcendent real-estate agent awarding parcels of land? Never’.63

No one would claim that Sri Lanka presented an exact analogy to these late pagan and Christian ideas in the West. For one thing, the language of monotheistic agency is quite inappropriate in the Pāli Buddhist context. Insofar as ‘Providence’ implies the continuing interventions of an all-powerful deity, it has little relevance to Lanka. Moreover, it has long been a concern for scholars of Sri Lanka to object to modern nationalist-Buddhist readings of the past that have often assumed the timeless truth of very similar ideas. Yet the main dimension of Providentialism at issue here is the provision of a sacred mandate, and in this sense it does indeed become possible to discern an analogous logic as far back as the Mahāvamsa. Who can doubt that it is a major task of the Mahāvamsa to celebrate the special

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relationship between Buddha and the blessed realm of Lanka, to establish how deeply the Buddha impressed his *dhamma* on the land by his three visits, just as he physically sank his foot into the mountain of Sumanakūṭa (known today as Adam’s Peak)? Or that the kings of Lanka are thus charged with a cherished role in protecting his teachings against its enemies, which will in turn mean that they must flourish?

We need not rehearse here well-known features of the *Mahāvamsa’s* account of Duṭugamaṇu’s war against the *demalas* from South India, so bluntly framed as a sacred war. As just one detail, consider the story of one of Duṭugamaṇu’s ten preternaturally gifted warriors. Nandhimitta had grown up in Anurādhapura and witnessed the *demalas* of Elara’s occupying force desecrating the *thūpas*, so he went among them tearing them apart and throwing their body parts over the walls. Then he reasoned that such negative attrition against the enemy was not as good as positively serving the religion; if he waged such war on behalf of the (Sinhala) kings of the south then he could add lustre to the faith. When the post-vernacular *Thūpavamsa* of the thirteenth century relays this episode, it need only elaborate the same theme by adding a few pungent details – that the *demalas* had been defecating and urinating in the courtyard of the sacred Bodh tree, for example. The line of alterity against the *demalas* from the *vamśas* to the most demotic war poems of the early modern period, is thus thickened with the sentiments of religious opposition. To clarify: it is not that Pollock discounts the possibility of the mobilization of religious alterity elsewhere in South Asia. Indeed, in other publications he has made such a claim with regard to the Rāmāyana’s role in the face of aggression by Muslim powers. It is rather that in the Lankan tradition a) this alterity may be expressed by a quasi-Providential connection between the fate of a religious project and the fate of a people and land, and b) was thus liable to become fused with other forms of group emotion.

Naturally, the assertion of religious superiority also had an autonomous dynamic: it was never merely the waging of ethnic or dynastic warfare by other means. The *Mahāvamsa* – giving voice to the Mahāvihāra tradition that would eventually come to reign supreme from the twelfth century – tells us of monks and kings concerned to put down heretical doctrines, by burning books if necessary. It is notable that the chief ‘heretical’ threat the Mahāvihāra identified during the reign of Vohārika Tissa (214–36 CE) came from the Vaitulyas, who seem to have taught something rather close to monotheism, or at least theism. But we know that elsewhere in the world such theological projects have often provided an irresistible ideological resource for political elites; nothing suggests Lanka was different in that regard.

If the quasi-Providentialist theme begins well before the shift to vernacular literature, once that shift was underway it was elaborated in more explicit terms. In a tenth-century inscription we have the first assertion that ‘none but future Buddhas would become kings of prosperous Lanka’. By this time, South Indian alterity was being provided by the Pāṇḍyas and then Cōḷas. Now, Pollock does note in parentheses that the Cōḷa Empire, with its aggressive assertion of Saivism,
stands as a rare exception to his remarks about the prevailing religious pluralism. By the ninth century, the Saiva canon was already shaping up against Jain and ‘Theravāda’ opponents. It would seem, then, that along this southern periphery of the Sanskrit cosmopolis we have the sacred plunged into the dirty work of political competition and group struggle in a way that is all too familiar from other parts of the world (but is unmatched elsewhere in Pollockian India). This generated a pugnacious rhetoric about the sanctified morality of warfare that one could easily find parallels for in Europe.

It is always worth emphasizing that ideological strategies of boundary-hardening may work by co-opting or mimicking the discourse of those the boundary is hardened against. The following quotation, taken from Charles Hallisey’s translation, is pertinent for many reasons. It is an inscription in Sinhala by Niśśankamalla (r. 1187–96):

King Niśśanka Malla ensured the long stability of the state and the religion (Lokaśāsanaya). Moreover considering that the island of Lanka is a noble land because of the establishment of the sāsana there, that the living beings in it have lofty excellences and that, therefore, they should receive advice and protection, he out of compassion, proclaimed the following maxim of good counsel:

Though kings appear in human form, they are human divinities (naradēvatā) and must, therefore, be regarded as gods. The appearance of an impartial king should be welcomed as the appearance of the Buddha… If the wishes of kings were not observed, the human world would be like hell, but if their wishes were respected it would be like heaven.

Such a bald assertion of the divinity of the king is rare in a Lankan context and possibly due to a desire to assert the kind of authority that his Indian counterparts possessed: this is cosmopolitanism as a function of royal peer-to-peer relations. Yet the inscription also speaks of the creation of a moral community rooted in a space at once political and geographical, which has kingship at its core and the advancement of a specific tradition of religious teachings as its purpose. Hallisey must be right to connect this to Niśśankamalla’s own origin in Kālinga and his unclear claims to the throne. It is precisely because of the cosmopolitan origin of the king, and the cosmopolitan audience for his claims, that he must engage in a profound emphasis on localization. One would be hard-pressed to avoid interpreting these assertions as an unusually blatant exercise in ‘legitimization’.

Nor can such immediate and contingent forms of legitimization simply be interpreted as evanescent strategies. Rather they streamed into and inflected a more enduring discourse that was picked up repeatedly in subsequent texts. The thirteenth-century Pujāvalīya has been much-quoted for the way that it aggressively asserts that only Buddhist kings protecting the sāsana should – and indeed would – be able to rule over Lanka. Any non-believers must simply fail just as the Buddha had banished the demons. This was written following the invasion
of the Kalinga King Māgha (1215) who stimulated the ire of the vaṃsa-writers ever after with his book-burning brand of Saivism. The Cūḷavāṃsa accused him of forcing people to convert to ‘wrong views’: ‘Thus the Damila warriors in imitation of the warriors of Māra, destroyed in the evil of their nature the laity and the order.’ In the midst of this ‘Tamil conflagration’, monks fled to a retreat in South India associated with a ‘Cōḷaganga’, and when Buddhism was restored under Parākramabāhu II (1236–70), mahathēras from India were brought over to assist. The sense then of the wider Buddhist ecumene was still present, but there is little doubt that Māgha’s unusually aggressive religious policy had stimulated another flash of electricity through the connection between religious community, sovereignty and land.

Pollock argues that the connection between popularizing religious movements and vernacularization has been greatly exaggerated, that the original impetus for the vernacular came from the secular aesthetic concerns of courts and only later did a few regional vernacular movements emerge with some sort of religious purpose. Whether this chronology fits Sri Lanka can be left to scholars with more expertise in this area. But it may be artificial in the Lankan case to perceive two distinct vernacular flowerings, a cosmopolitan version divorced from religion and then a regional ‘counterrevolution’ closely linked with religious community. According to Jonathan Walters, the popularization of Buddhism can also be located in the tenth to twelfth centuries. Certainly, whether they constitute a ‘second wave’ or not, various thirteenth- to fifteenth-century Sinhala texts could not be more explicit that their function was to make Buddhist teachings widely available to the non-learned. The Sinhala Thūpavamsa, for example, reflects (or seeks to drive) the development of a cult of the relics in Lanka, and this is a major mechanism by which sacred power is concretized for a mass audience, or a population gathered into an imagined community of Buddhist devotees. (Indeed, we shall see the continuing success of this project in the crucial role played by the Tooth Relic in political conflicts till the last days of the Kandyan kingdom.) It is likely that the identification between Buddhism and Lanka was further strengthened by the disappearance of Buddhist institutions in India from around this date.

Notice that we have not yet broached modernity – or even what some scholars now refer to as ‘early modernity’. When we come to the latter end of the premodern, Pollock does explore the possibility that the more northerly parts of South Asia may have experienced a form of alterity in the shape of the encroaching dominion of Muslim elites, and that in a few cases this might possibly have stimulated a vernacular response and a religious repudiation. Ultimately, however, he is reluctant to assign this much causal weight. A little later, Lanka had its own marauding monotheists to contend with, and these offered yet another manifestation of alterity. In general, no scholar has been willing to compare the Lankan experience of the introduction of European Christianity with the Indian experience of the introduction of West and Central Asian Islam further north. This is no doubt because the modern-day politics of the historiographies are so
differently organized. Yet a range of practices – above all the controversial facts of temple-destruction – present points of comparison. Whatever current scholarship is prepared to concede for the northern case, it is easier to acknowledge that the aggressive exclusivism of Portuguese Catholicism stimulated intermittently more resistant and boundary-hardened forms of Buddhist sentiment.90

Pollock successfully isolates state formation and royal ambition as the main context for Sanskritization, yet the connection between the adoption of the whole Sanskrit imaginaire and the political will of kings is left ultimately mysterious. Underlying this is an initially laudable desire not to reduce cultural production to a matter of political instrumentality.91 But so uncompromising is his theoretical antagonism to the notion of ‘legitimization’ that Indic culture ends up as divergent from the West even at the level of the most basic mechanism by which religion relates to politics. Hence ‘ideology’ may be a permissible concept for analysing Europe but not South Asia.92 Elites did not ‘need’ religion, apparently, or ‘use’ it or even ‘benefit’ from it politically: in the Sanskrit mode of being, they simply lived and dreamed within its embrace.

In the case of Lanka, however, it seems that the celebration and imaginative evocation of the geography of the island of Lanka, the assertion of the moral supremacy of Buddhism, the elaboration of Pāli and Sinhala as literary languages, and the coalescence of Sinhalaness as an ethnic identity may all be related to the struggle to maintain a form of political unity and independence from foreign powers.93

It is not, after all, hugely surprising that Sri Lanka should sit uncomfortably within some of Pollock’s generalizations: it is the fate of ambitious attempts at model building to be set upon by specialists agitated by the righteous indignation of the counterexample. It may serve to highlight a general problem with the method, however, which is to insist too much on the causal priority of cultural difference. This amounts to the exaltation of a different Indic ‘ontology’ from which various ogres of liberal academia have been gratifyingly banished: thus the Sanskrit world did not have ‘empire’ but cosmopolitics; it did not give rise to the nation-state but to ‘vernacular polities’; it did not have ‘race’ or ‘ethnicity’ but entirely different kinds of groupings; and it was even free from ‘ideology’ itself insofar as its dealings with the sacred were simply sincere.

But let us assume, for the moment, that Pollock is right about the implications of vernacularization in the Sanskrit cosmopolis in general but Sri Lanka fails to fit the model in the ways addressed above. In that case, the more interesting question is why that should be so.94 Unfortunately, it is also more difficult to answer. In his expressed reservations about Sri Lanka, Pollock refers to its participation in another cosmopolitan order, that of Pāli imaginaire. Indeed, the more that we privilege the foundational role of the Pāli worldview in Lanka, the more Lanka could even be seen as ‘the exception that proves the rule’ of Pollock’s thesis. Does it show what happens when part of South Asia, so obviously part of the Indic world in so many ways, comes under the sway of a different literary or even cognitive regime? Steven Collins had already pointed out the difference between
'the Indic model of clerical-ideological power’ in which Sanskrit was imposed as a medium of expression without seeking to impose a single belief system, and the Pāli Theravāda model in which there was ‘an isomorphism between a single language and a unitary ideology’. But given that what is at issue here is not Buddhism per se, which embedded itself in Asian societies in myriad ways, but the way that it was localized in the resurrected Pāli texts of the Lankan vamsas, to appeal to Pāli is therefore only to rephrase the question about Lanka. If the ‘Pāli cultural package’ adopted by the Southeast Asian centres was first formed in Sri Lanka, we are pressed again to consider what may have made the history of identity formation in the island distinctive.

Victor Lieberman’s recent work of comparative history may provide us with the beginnings of an explanation framed in geopolitical terms. He places great emphasis on variations in how ‘protected’ different parts of Eurasia were. In the first instance, this refers to whether they were vulnerable to conquest by Inner Asian warrior groups, but we could extend it more broadly to long-term openness to all kinds of conquest elites. The island of Lanka, as the Sanskrit poets were fond of pointing out, is surrounded by the ocean. However clichéd its island status has become and however much the global history of today tends to emphasize connectivity – yet those island boundaries mattered profoundly. They presented a natural (although by no means implacable) limit to the political ambitions of Sinhala rulers from earliest times: there was really no need for any ‘contraction to the vernacular polity’ that Pollock discerns elsewhere. More significantly, the ocean meant that while Lanka was open to the extension of military and political might by South Indian powers from at least the mid-first millennium CE, these projects were never strong enough to sweep away rule by Sinhala-speaking Buddhist rulers for more than a few generations.

Pollock refers to the ‘veritable law of political entropy’ in India such that few ruling lineages lasted more than two to three centuries. Most significant for us is to note the relatively weak continuity of identity between the dynasties riding these cycles in the subcontinent, even if there were very long-running chains of imperial imitation and charter state referral. In Sri Lanka, the sense of the continuity between different instantiations of Sinhala kingship sustained by its relationship with the sāsana was presumably more profound. This may be partly because of its long gestation in Anurādhapura, which had its origins in the mid-first millennium BCE and was not abandoned until the very end of the first millennium CE and was the unrivalled centre of political life in the island for that time. It would be difficult to find an equivalent in India over the same vast stretch of time. After that, as Sri Lanka was drawn further into dynastic competition with South India, the life-cycle of political centres became shorter and shorter, but perhaps by that time extraordinary continuity had done its work. In short, Sri Lanka’s geographical position may have provided it with enough ‘protection’ for profound sensations of continuity to develop, and enough ‘exposure’ or alterity for self-conscious identities to form around those continuities.
This may seem like a very abstract analysis, but in one sense it does find an echo in the perceptions of historical Sinhala speakers themselves. As we saw, from the viewpoint of the courts in the Sinhala-dominated south, the island has long been a distinctive self-contained arena of political aspiration. That the ‘reification’ of Lanka has a considerable history before colonial powers ever started to imagine the land for themselves is worth emphasizing given a common tendency to emphasize British ideological manufacturing in particular. Nevertheless a certain puzzle remains. Was the rest of the Sanskrit cosmopolis really so divergent from the European trajectory as Pollock claims? If so, why should the Pāli landscape take on contours that look a little more ‘European’ in appearance – at least when viewed in a certain light? Was the Lankan crucible really so important?

The function of the foreign in dynastic systems: a comparative perspective

Thus far we have touched upon ways in which rulers and subjects may be bound together as an imagined community tied to the land. But this tendency existed in tension with an equally common desire on the part of ruling elites to associate themselves with the world beyond the local. The purpose of this second part of the chapter is to develop an appreciation of the paradoxical manifestations of this tension, with the help of two brief comparative forays.

Rather than appeal to ‘cosmopolitanism’, we may do better to consider the drivers of premodern elite ‘extraversion’, by which the supra-local (its commercial fecundity, modes of civility, technology, potential allies and efficacious ritual) is seen as a source of local power. One of the most important of these was simply elite will to power – that is, their desire to conquer neighbouring realms and expand their hegemony: to create empires. Imperial rulership is almost by definition estranged from certain groups of subjects. But there is a less routinely observed process that works the other way, where elites sense their peripheral position in relation to imperial formations, and find themselves drawn to their glamorous, expansive and sophisticated civilizational traditions, their long-refined literary cultures and long-burnished imagery of rulership.103 Local rulers are concerned with their position relative to their peers in the wider world, and these can only be addressed in a ‘cosmopolitan’ language of equivalent reach.104

But if local rulers suffer from status anxiety with relation to foreign rulers, their domestic status is hardly a matter of blithe assurance either. Another driver of elite extraversion then is lodged within the very process of erecting hierarchy, in the necessity for elites to distinguish themselves from the lower orders: to reign over the merely domestic by signalling their transcendence of it. In this way, kings find a way to lift themselves above the entanglements of local kinship claims, the pretensions of aristocrats and upstart chiefs.105 In contrast to Pollock’s vision of South Asian kingship as something simply accepted by the governed as an unquestionable fact of life, it is surely better to consider it as the site of constant...
symbolic labour, as new means of exaltation are gleaned and new audiences for its self-display are assembled. Just as ruling elites are driven to seize upon coercive powers from the outside (guns, mercenaries, alliances), and economic powers from the outside (trade revenues, commercial taxes), so they are prone to seek out means of symbolic distinction from the outside too.

In the inscription quoted above, Niṣṣānkamalla may have emphasized the importance of Buddhist kingship in order to ward off any claims from other South Indian powers but he also sought to protect his position from local claimants by insisting that the kings of Lanka must be of kṣatriya caste, which appealed to a wider Indic normative tradition and a status that no one else on the island could claim. This introduces a more specific aspect of this process of royal estrangement, which is a function of the biological reproduction of rarefied breeds. For such distinction to be maintained, it becomes desirable to find marriage partners boasting the best claims of royal blood, and where else could these be found but in foreign lands? The very claim of a dynasty to unique status within their realm drives the search for marital alliance without it. This is why in monarchical polities, foreign elites are rarely merely enemies; they are nearly always also affines. To the extent that royal courts tend to participate in transregional kinship networks and elite cultures distinct from their subjects, and deny their subjects much meaningful participation in governance, all premodern dynastic states have a somewhat ‘imperial’ quality.

The potency of the foreign is not simply a threat to local rulers then; it is also an opportunity. Another ubiquitous driver of elite extraversion is the way that internal factional conflicts within local centres lead rivals to appeal to foreign powers to support their cause: this is the key logic behind the phenomena of Lankan princes in exile explored in Biedermann’s chapter in this volume (Chapter 7). But even on a symbolic level, declarations of vassalage or submission to external empires may be undertaken in order to strengthen claims to local sovereignty. This has been a theme in recent work on Lanka’s sixteenth century, analysing both the initial accord with the Portuguese in 1506 and the subsequent proclamations of vassalage to the kings in Lisbon over the decades following 1518. This is surely the context too in which Āhālēpōla’s willingness to advertise his acknowledgement of George III’s suzerainty in 1816, and yet at the same time establish himself as a king in the full sense, which Sivasundaram mentions in this volume (Chapter 10). This vision of hierarchical kingship was no longer acceptable to nineteenth-century British officials in the way that it had been to Portuguese kings of the sixteenth century, who had happily acted as liege to Lankan kings and cakravartis.

In late eighteenth-century Hawaii, we see a similar movement on the part of local elites, but this also reflected a particularly powerful driver of elite extraversion: the tradition that their claims to superiority already depended on a conception of themselves as strangers or even as foreign aggressors to the native people. This phenomenon of stranger-kingship has been extensively analysed by Marshall Sahlins. I have written on this analysis at length elsewhere, so this is not the place for a proper discussion, except to say that it alerts
us to a globally prevalent means of understanding the ascension of kingship as a journey from the zones beyond – the wild, foreign, animal, supernatural, transgressive – to the heart of the domestic: it is the archetypal narrative of alien potency digested, and it appears over and again in the Mahāvamsa.\(^{113}\) (Fundamentally, then, its initial emergence is not best seen as a legitimization of kingship so much as a collective means of understanding the origins of hierarchical society.)\(^{114}\) Here we need only note that there seem to be at least two forms in which the logic of the stranger-king model may impress itself upon our sources: 1) as a structuring principle of origin myth for rulers and peoples, and 2) as a charter for a living mode of social organization. I have argued that the first is strongly present in the Pāli and Sinhala material, which thus bear striking analogies with other origin myths worldwide. Indeed, the Shamabala of Tanganyika have told a story about a lion king founder that is strikingly close to that of Sīhabāhu.\(^{115}\) But it is worth taking this opportunity to note that the second was not, I think, present.\(^{116}\)

To clarify: in the latter cases, Sahlins perceives a ‘dual society’ in which the foreign-born ruling dynasty must bow to the ritual primacy of the autochthonous people. The king may have overriding authority but by various means his depend-ency on the life-giving powers of the indigenous people is registered. There are a few indications that the symbolic relationship between the väddās and Sinhala kingship may have preserved some such understanding.\(^{117}\) It is intriguing, for example, that the rebel king of 1815–18 should have been presented to the people surrounded by väddās.\(^{118}\) But in general the väddās were symbolically as well as geographically on the margins of the Sinhala social order. This mirrors the manner in which the mythical indigenes, the yakkhas, are simply purged from the island in the vāṃsas (although note they return…), or that their descendants, the Pulindas (Vijaya’s offspring with Kuvenī) were banished. Whereas in the most typical ‘dual society’ the general name for the people is derived from the autochthons, in the case of Sri Lanka it derives, as we have seen, from the royal dynasty itself, which arrives to the island as foreign. In fact, in Lankan society, at times the most important court ritualists were Brahmans.

So the foreignness of the ruling stratum was not a predicate of Sinhala social and political life in quite the manner that it apparently was for the chiefly elites in parts of Oceania (such as the ali‘i in Hawaii). This is not at all to deny that the dynasties ruling over Sinhala kingdoms often carried foreign blood or maintained foreign lifestyles as a matter of fact. We have already referred to the many reasons why that should be so in terms of the interests of the dynasty, chief among them the marital logic of dynastic systems and the political logic of hierarchical uniqueness. However, we can supplement this with a consideration of the interests of the noble class beneath it, which may in certain situations seek out stranger-kings in order to establish a relatively disinterested force of arbitration and maintain the balance of power among the various factions. In this way, they forgo the potential for immediate advantage for the long-term preservation of stability. This understanding of stranger-kingship – quite distinct from the
Sahlinsian model, and which rather recalls a Hobbesian vision of the development of the state – has been applied in Southeast Asian historiography and was introduced into a Lankan context by Alicia Schrikker. To the extent that the ideology of kingship is thereby understood as a reflex of political calculation, however, it would imply a certain instability in the system. This is because the utility of the stranger-king to the nobility must be set against the bar it places to their highest pretensions, for a faction that finds itself suddenly out of favour that bar may seem disagreeably high. We shall return to the implications of this below.

In what follows, we shall rather emphasize two vaguely paradoxical points: the first is that the foreignness of the king need not impede the coalescence of ethnic feeling beneath or around him, and the second is that his foreignness is usually subject to certain forms of domestication which renders it palatable. These two points have a certain relevance in the context of Lankan historiography. It is sometimes argued, for example, that the fact that the Nāyaka kings of Kandy (1739–1815) hailed from Madura and upheld a distinct identity and lifestyle distinguishing themselves from the Sinhala nobility must tell of the absence of Lankan patriotism or Sinhala group belonging. Or that there must therefore be two distinct understandings of Sinhalaness at work, the ‘political’ and ‘cultural’, which were not equivalent. This is the point at which the comparative method may provide some assistance, for our interpretation of any one case really depends on certain sociological or even psychological assumptions: how does group identity formation work in monarchical societies? What kind of logic does it tend to obey?

At this point, Britain may be appealed to for comparative purposes. From the late medieval period to the present day, England has had royal dynasties of foreign origin: the Welsh Tudors, Scottish Stuarts, followed by Germans of some description to the present day, with the Hanoverians and Windsors. George III (r. 1760–1820), for example, who claimed sovereignty over Sri Lanka in the 1810s, was the third Hanoverian king of Great Britain and Ireland but the first to use English as his first language, and was the result of a union between Frederick, Prince of Wales, and Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha. This has been the way of things regardless of great transformations in the political structures over which the ‘kings and queens of England’ reigned from their medieval origins into their early modern expansions and then the era of the full-blooded nation-state and empire. Even the briefest consideration of early modern English history indicates then that the inherent ‘extra-version’ or rampant cosmopolitanism of premodern dynastic systems need not act as an indigestible obstacle to the emergence of ethnic and patriotic emotion.

**Indigestible Europeans**

We should not then expect anything tidier about identity politics in Lanka. In the Kandyan kingdom, the kings may have been more visibly and emphatically foreign in certain ways than some of their counterparts in Britain, and they long
retained the loyalty of most of their Sinhala subjects regardless.\textsuperscript{124} But they too were made acceptable through certain limited forms of indigenization.\textsuperscript{125} And there is nothing unexpected in comparative terms about the suggestion that their foreign status or Saivite inclinations could become a point of vulnerability to be probed by political opponents at specific moments. To follow Schrikker’s reasoning, this might occur when the political attractions of the stranger-king began to pall for elements of the Kandyan aristocracy – when the Nāyakas became a more entrenched rival for resources.\textsuperscript{126}

At this point, however, our notions about how Kandyan society functioned become confused by the possibility of European influence – on both our sources and local conceptions themselves. With regard to the former, could it be that Lankan society comes to seem comparable simply because the growing preponderance of Dutch and British source material has – deliberately or ignorantly – obscured cultural difference? As for the possibility that European assumptions had begun to infect the local political imagination, we could consider, in the first decade or two of the nineteenth century, the vituperative repudiation of the Nāyakas, in the \textit{Vadiga Haṭana} and the \textit{Kiraḷa Sandēśaya} of 1815. These disparage the last king of Kandy in the most blatantly ethnic manner as a ‘demāḷa’ eunuch who had displaced the Sinhalese. It has been suggested that this represents the fruits of Dutch and particularly British propaganda, as both had been trying to drive an ethnic wedge through the heart of the Kandyan kingdom for some time – with little success until this point.\textsuperscript{127} Yet even if that hypothesis be granted, it involved the monarch’s opponents in a redeployment of one of the oldest tropes in the Sinhala literature.\textsuperscript{128}

The Portuguese, as far as we know, did not seek to found their rule on a principle of ethnic divide and rule. The distinct ethnicity, culture and political history of the Tamils of the north may have been one reason why relations with Jaffna were often managed separately from Mannar or South India before its conquest in 1619 – to that extent the Portuguese were involved in a project of ‘de-islanding’ – but the Portuguese made no attempt to incite or shape ethnic divisions for their own ends. Their intrigues worked through the manipulation of feelings of vassalage and royal authority that both sides understood, and through the insinuation of Christianity. What they were obsessed with was the management of religious difference rather than ethnic rivalry. Portuguese sources do occasionally speculate on the political consequences of ethnic emotion, however. Indeed, if the fall of Kandy in 1815 involved a play on xenophobia, it is intriguing that the collapse of Parākramabāhu VI’s (1411–65) unification in the 1470s and the ultimate fall of Kōṭṭe in the 1590s also may have involved something similar.\textsuperscript{129} When Rājasimha I of Sitāvaka died in 1593, the military was left in the hands of one of the old king’s favourites, a Saivite immigrant by the name of Manamperuma Mōhoṭṭāla. However, he was then forced to defect to the forces of Kōṭṭe and the Portuguese, who gave him a title and a Sinhala name invoking past Kandyan kings – Jayavīra Baṇḍāra. This was decisive: an exceptionally able commander, he played a vital role in the crushing of resistance in
the lowlands and almost delivered the highlands to the Portuguese. The central point for us here is why he defected. Two Portuguese sources have it that he had been forced out of Sitāvaka because he was a foreigner and lacked the right dynastic genealogy. If we are inclined to read this as an early example of European ethno-thought, we must at least pause at the loose congruence with the Rājāvaliya’s assertion that he was driven out of Sitāvaka by popular mockery of his Saivism.130

The most significant way in which kings of foreign origin were domesticated, of course, was by establishing their status as protectors of Buddhism, as many scholars have emphasized.131 Indeed, there seems something of a tendency for kings with the strongest foreign associations to be those who produce the strongest articulations of Lanka as a land of Buddhist truth and Buddhist kings.132 If this is the case, could then European colonial rulers not also become appropriately domesticated to the extent that they were prepared to become patrons of Buddhism? The question hardly applies to the Portuguese, who repudiated Buddhism’s place in the political order almost entirely. There is one partial exception: the strange and murky case of their first conquering captain-general, Jerónimo de Azevedo (1540–1625), who set up a court in Malvāna and who appears in a few reports as a Kurtz-like figure, being carried around on a palanquin and addressed as deviyo. But this was only ever a very partial accommodation. Azevedo was involved in some of the bloodiest campaigns of conquest, which involved the destruction of Buddhist and Hindu sacred structures too. Nevertheless, there is a potential analogy to be drawn between Azevedo and the first Briton in charge of Kandy after the conquest of 1815, John D’Oyly, who also seems to have partially indigenized in certain ways as resident. Both Azevedo and D’Oyly represent the high point in attempting to maintain continuity with Lankan traditions of government at the very start of imperial rule in the low country and Kandy respectively.133 There is even a certain similarity between the Kandyan Convention of 1815 and the agreements in 1597 (once known as the ‘Malvāna Convention’), which established Portuguese sovereignty over the lowlands;134 But D’Oyly was far more sympathetic to Buddhism than any Portuguese officer could have been, and the Kandyan convention allowed the British to become more convincing patrons of Buddhism.135 They deliberately cultivated this status in an attempt to defuse resistance – to garner, even in the crudest sense of the word, a modicum of legitimacy.

All this makes sense in terms of a very long-term structure of Buddhist authority on the island. And there are recurring patterns to be found in how authority was contested too. Now, such contestation of monarchical authority was rather routine in Lankan political life, for all kinds of structural reasons, but the questions here concern the symbolic repertoire that was mobilized when mounted against European rulers. In what follows, I shall suggest that the wars of 1815–18 – the subject of Sujit Sivasundaram’s Chapter 10 in this volume – were conducted according to the same grammar of rebellion that we see in the period of Portuguese direct rule of the lowlands (1590s–1650s). In both
cases, for all the efforts of Azevedo or D’Oyly and Brownrigg, a massive uprising followed shortly after direct rule was announced, such that it may be seen as a mutation in the leadership of the war of resistance as much as a rebellion. This timing indicates that the idea of the new imposition of direct rule by the European power was offensive and not only the playing out of exploitative policies. In both cases, it is plausible that the failure of the new rulers to convincingly inhabit the ritual forms of Buddhist kingship was partly to blame. As well as pointing to the pre-British propensity of Kandyan society for rebellion, Brownrigg also ascribes the cause of rebellion in 1815–18 to fears about the danger to Buddhism. To that extent, it does indeed seem more restorationist than ‘revolutionary’. (The subsequent withdrawal of British support for Buddhism, thus reverting to more typical Christian stance, was one reason for the outbreak of rebellion in 1848.)

In both periods, the attempt to crush the wave of resistance involved a ratcheting up of violence, displays of exemplary punishment and scorched earth tactics – no doubt the product of an essentially military logic at work. Both reactions failed to produce lasting peace and were followed by several more uprisings. More significant is that in both periods, the same symbolic repertoire of indigenous authority was deployed: resistance threw up pretenders with shadowy origins who claimed royal blood regardless, and these pretenders attempted to associate themselves with ancient sites and objects redolent of political unity. The British ended up chasing after the Tooth Relic in the manner of claimants to the throne of centuries long past. During the course of the rebellion of 1817–18, there was an attempt to unveil a new pretender at Dambulla Vihāra and otherwise exploit the symbolic value of Anurādhapura. This probably owed little to early British Orientalist interest in the Lankan past, to Dutch interpretations, nor even to specifically Kandyan developments, for the same pattern can be found in the rebellions of 1616–19. One of the leaders in the Seven Koraless, Nikapiṭiya Baṇḍāra, claimed ancestry from Rājasimha of Sītāvaka, and announced his rebellion at Anurādhapura in the guise of a yogi (jogue) wearing animal skins. If the British tried to manage the symbolic capital of the ancient capital, the Portuguese were also alarmed at the sheer antiquity of indigenous kingship as relayed in the popular memories surrounding Anurādhapura in the early seventeenth century.

One point that emerges from this is that Buddhist patronage was not therefore the only traditional criterion by which kingship was imagined as legitimate. The manufacture of kingship involved appealing to the shared historical memory of the Sinhala group, its physical vestiges of ancient greatness, and its origin myths: letters from the Kandyan court in 1811 and 1812, for example, begin by placing the Nāyaka kings of Kandy in the line of kings reaching back to Vijaya. As always and everywhere in monarchical societies, dynastic claims were crucial. The Nāyaka dynastic name long held its appeal, but if Gananath Obeyesekere is right, even this became a source of weakness in 1760 insofar as they could not
claim the more exalted Buddhist lineage of the solar dynasty. As for colonial elites, they may have been subject to a certain ‘bottom-up’ process of indigenization, particularly through the composition of praise poems in the style of prasasti – even marauding Portuguese governor-generals could become heroes in this way. But as a matter of the top-down projection of rulership ideology, they could not and did not attempt to embody the traditional forms of kingship in the variety of ways that the Nāyakas strove to. Their appeal (such as it was) had to rest on other grounds: on the material advantages that new power regimes may offer to collaborators, or eventually on rewriting the rules of legitimacy, among others.

The continuities indicated above are only surprising if we imagine that the waves of Portuguese, Dutch and early British rule had had the power to reorganize the mental and emotional life of Sinhalese subjects in both conquered and un-conquered areas in profound ways. It has been a continuing problem for Lankan historiography as to how to translate the great emphasis on the cognitive power of British colonialism in Indian historical writing to the Lankan case. This is partly because Lanka had already endured more than 200 years of European rule before the British arrived. This means that ascribing apparently long-term patterns of Lankan agency to the misconceptions of ‘colonial discourse’ would involve stretching the latter term to include sixteenth- and late seventeenth-century Portuguese texts – but these operated according to a rather different logic to that of the nineteenth-century Orientalism that has invited so much academic attention. Sujit Sivasundaram has sought to move around the problem by refusing the conceptual dichotomies of indigenous/colonial or continuity/change and referring instead to continual ‘recycling’ and ‘resituating’. This comes at the price of leaving us unable to assess the extent to which any transition can be said to have occurred under the British or with the passage into the modern era. Ultimately, we have to establish some sort of interpretation of the pre-existing patterns of identity formation in order to have any chance of understanding the significance of subsequent developments.

Such transformations there surely were, and indeed there is still much opportunity for analysing the changes in identity politics over the whole period of imperial intrusion (1500–1950). But any such analysis would have to begin by noticing the striking patterns of continuity we have discussed. One last such pattern can be found in the ideological expression of resistance to European powers, as we see in the genre of the ḫatana poem, which displays a certain stability in imagery, tone and organizing ideas from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, as Michael Roberts’ work has shown. The island of Lanka is exalted; its political unity under a cakravarti ruler conceived as a matter of natural perfection (although it uses an archaic political geography of the ‘Trisiṃhala’ to express this); the glory of its god-like kings are sung; present conflicts are described in terms of ancient ones; and enemies are disparaged in visceral manner, often as animals, demons, beef-eaters and depraved addicts.
In the climax to the first instance of the war-poem genre, the \textit{Sitāvaka Haṭana} of 1585, King Māyādunnē, who is credited with keeping at bay the Portuguese and their local allies, hands over his throne to his son Rājasimha:

To everyone who was in this island of Lanka called dhamma [\textit{dahan namāti lakdiva}]
I was like a lamp tree [\textit{pahan ruka}], owning it.
For the sake of dhamma in Sri Lanka in a noble way
Noble lord, I hand over all of Trisimhale to you\textsuperscript{156}

This is a very tricky verse to translate.\textsuperscript{157} But it is difficult to avoid the sense that ‘the island of the dhamma’ concept is resonating rather loudly here rather than waiting for the nineteenth century to come round. However, the equation between the land and the Buddhist dispensation misses out the third point of a triad: kingship. Māyādunnē is made to compare himself to a great lit-up tree standing at the centre of the island and sheltering it with a canopy of Buddhist righteousness.\textsuperscript{158} There also seems an echo here of the \textit{kapruka}, the tree of bounty in Śakra’s heaven.\textsuperscript{159}

In the following verse, Māyādunnē compares his son and heir to Śakra, which returns us to Pollockian themes.\textsuperscript{160} Indeed, it is perhaps ironic how much these profoundly vernacular poems register the continuing appeal of the Sanskrit cosmos as a means of glorifying Lankan personae and events. This must be partly because of the rich imagery of noble conflict in Sanskrit literature: the wars of Rāma and Rāvana or the Suras and Asuras provided a means of expressing the heroism of the struggle against dreadful enemies.\textsuperscript{161}

Royal prowess always has its cosmopolitan dimension – but as the subordination of alien potency. Thus the \textit{Rājasimha Haṭana} of c. 1638 can celebrate Rājasimha’s comprehensive mastery of languages – ‘Demaḷa and Sinhala, Sanskrit, Pāli, and Nagara, Portuguese, and many another lore he learnt\textsuperscript{162} – while comparing the Portuguese to ogres, demons and ‘cruel demaḷas’. The operation of the digestive principle should not be expected to look logically coherent. Lankan kings from before the sixteenth through to the early nineteenth century sought foreign troops of all kinds to have at their disposal – perhaps the most concrete image of outside strength appropriately harnessed. But this does not hinder the \textit{haṭanas} from emphasizing the ethnic heterogeneity of enemy forces in a disparaging manner. If we find the \textit{Vadiga Haṭana} listing the ‘motley band’ of groups fighting for the British in 1815, it is strikingly similar to the list of the foreign armies (\textit{para senaga}) in the \textit{Sitāvaka Haṭana} – with the qualification that the earlier poem is much more blatant in its xenophobic disgust.\textsuperscript{164} Here again, analyses of local texts hunting for signs of British influence come up against the awkward fact of Lanka’s earlier waves of engagement with European and earlier regional imperialisms. In one sense at least, the digestive principle gestures to a human universal: the \textit{haṭanas} in this regard are no more contradictory than the
British who used Malay or Sinhalese Lascarins while developing an infamous form of ethnic and racial pride.

The concept of cosmopolitanism has its place as a quick means of referring to a disposition to esteem the non-local. But it does not get us very far in understanding the complex place of the foreign in the symbolic manufacture of monarchy or the drivers of royal ‘extraversion’ more widely. Sri Lanka participated vigorously in the Sanskrit imaginaire and digested it thoroughly in its vernacular literature; it also produced distinct modes of foreign incorporation that certainly diverged from the European experience. This does not equate, however, to the absence of either sensations of peoplehood or the elaboration of Providentialist-style legitimation. With regard to these phenomena, many useful comparisons with the long term of European history may be discerned. In more general terms still, premodern monarchs everywhere have had to find some balance between the imperatives of expressing the wider group identity of their subjects and setting themselves above and apart from them. In Lanka, foreign potency always held a certain appeal, but if it appeared indigestible, the Lankan body politic knew well enough how to eject it.