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INTRODUCTION



Lankapura: The Legacy of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

The five articles which make up this special issue of South Asia explore the role of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lankan art, literature, religious ritual and political discourse in shaping Sinhala Buddhist and Tamil Saiva perceptions of the island's distant past. Contributors work to answer the question as to when and how Sri Lanka came to be equated with the mythic 'Lankapura' of Valmiki's epic, exploring both positive and negative portrayals of Ravana (ruler of Lanka antagonist of the *Ramayana*) in Sinhala and Tamil literature from the late medieval period to the present day. Authors work to account for the politicisation and historicisation of the *Ramayana* in twenty-first century Sri Lanka (including similarities to and differences from the contemporary Indian situation), along with the appropriation of Ravana as a Sinhala Buddhist cultural hero, and the incorporation of Vibhishana as a 'guardian deity' in the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon.

KEYWORDS

Ramayana; Sri Lanka; nationalism; *Sinhala literature*; Tamil literature; Ravana; Saivism

Famous throughout the region as an epic narrative and encyclopedia of ancient lore, the *Ramayana* serves as a basic idiom through which South and Southeast Asians understand and express their past. In addition to the many vernacular Hindu iterations of the *Ramayana*, Jains, Sikhs, Mughals, Thai and Lao Buddhists, and various tribal groups all have their own versions of the story, often with significant deviations from the 'standard' (i.e. Valmiki's) iteration, and often reflecting their own ideals of justice, heroism and religious community. It is a subject of some curiosity, then, that Sri Lanka—perhaps the very 'Lanka' which figures so centrally in the epic—should not have a version of its own.

To date, scholarship addressing this question has focused on the absence of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka, with a number of contentions having been put forward to account for the exclusion of the epic from the island's Pali chronicles.¹ Largely

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1. Heinz Bechert famously argued that the Mahavihara writers of early Pali chronicles consciously excluded any narrative from the *Ramayana* in order to preserve the primacy of Sinhala Buddhist political and religious life on the island. See Heinz Bechert, 'The Beginnings of Buddhist Historiography: Mahavamsa and Political Thinking', in Bardwell Smith (ed.), *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka* (Chambersburg, PA: Anima Books, 1978), pp. 1–12. Richard Gombrich speculated that the absence of the *Ramayana* in Pali historiography reflects Theravada Buddhist hostility towards its Brahmanical Hindu values. Richard Gombrich, 'The *Vessantara Jataka*,

overlooked however has been the routine presence of *Ramayana* characters, imagery and narrative motifs in Sinhala Buddhist poetry and historical works, in the architecture and ritual life of Buddhist *viharas* (temples), as well as in the myths associated with the founding of some of Sri Lanka's most significant Hindu temples. While there appears to have been a tradition of composition of poetry related to the *Ramayana* in literate circles from quite early on in Sri Lanka (most famously attested in Kumaradasa's fifth-century *Janakiharana*), it is not until the fourteenth century that we begin to see a sizeable impression of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka (in Sinhala Buddhist folklore, literature and temple life in particular). This shift is explicable insofar as the fourteenth century corresponded to increased South Indian influence in Sri Lanka, in the context of (1) the emerging independent Tamil kingdom of Jaffna; (2) a change in composition among the ruling elites of the island's southwest (with two prominent royal families of this era being of Malayali extraction); and (3) at the level of the overall demographics of the island, with Sri Lanka's south and southwest absorbing a sizeable influx of immigrants from the southern subcontinent from the fourteenth century onwards. The incorporation of aspects of South Indian culture into Sinhala Buddhist architecture, and temple and agricultural rituals, as well as the Sinhala language itself has been catalogued in a number of significant scholarly works.²

The contributions to this special section of *South Asia* are intended as preliminary efforts toward a fuller understanding of the literary and social history of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka. Contributors work to answer the most elementary of historical questions—when and how Sri Lanka became associated with Ravana's mythical abode of Lankapura (an equivalence nowhere to be found in the earliest Sanskrit versions of the epic)—going on to consider the prominence of Vibhishana (Ravana's brother and Rama's appointed successor to the crown of Lanka) at medieval Sinhala Buddhist and temples, his continued relevance, and the significance of the earliest references to Ravana as ancient ruler of the island in Sinhala chronicles, topographical works and poetry.

Together these contributions point out that either by embracing the 'standard *Ramayana*' or re-envisioning the narrative in a uniquely local fashion, in various contexts, the epic was made to serve the interests of both Tamil Saiva and Sinhala Buddhist religious and political elites in Sri Lanka historically. The essays direct the

the *Ramayana*, and the *Dasaratha Jataka*', in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 105, no. 3 (1985), pp. 427–37. Steven Collins has suggested that the Pali *Vessantara Jataka* was able to serve as a substitute for the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka because it is made up of the same basic story matrix. Steven Collins, 'What is Literature in Pali?', in Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 649–88.

2. Gananath Obeyesekere traces the Sri Lankan domestication of the goddess Pattini, deriving originally from the character Kannagi of the *Cilappatikaram*, in his landmark *Cult of the Goddess Pattini* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1984). On the incorporation of South Indian hereditary occupational groups into the medieval Sri Lankan social landscape, see Bruce Ryan, *Caste in Modern Ceylon: The Sinhalese Caste System in Transition* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953); and Michael Roberts, *Caste Conflict and Elite Formation: The Rise of a Karava Elite in Sri Lanka, 1500–1931* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982). On the appearance of South Indian architectural motifs at Buddhist *viharas* and temple complexes, see Sujatha A. Meegama, 'From Kovils to Devalas: Patronage and "Influence" at Buddhist and Hindu Temples in Sri Lanka', PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2011. For a study of the impact of the Tamil language on Sinhala lexicon and grammar, see Peter Silva, 'The Influence of Dravida on Sinhalese', PhD dissertation, Oxford University, Oxford, 1964.

reader to the ways in which these various trajectories of the *Ramayana* mirrored the island's religious, political and social relations with the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

Justin Henry's paper, 'Explorations in the Transmission of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka', summarises scholarly perspectives on the presence and absence of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka, seeking to explain possible sources for the appearance of the epic's dramatis personae (Rama, Ravana and Vibhishana) in late medieval Sinhala literature. He traces one route of diffusion of the epic into Buddhist historical literature and folklore by way of the Tamil Hindu kingdom of Jaffna, arguing that Sri Lankan Tamils openly accepted the identification of the island with the Lanka of the *Ramayana*, reversing however the negative and demonic connotations of their Chola predecessors. Tamil Hindu kings of northern Sri Lanka became themselves 'guardians of the bridge', that is, protectors of the narrow, submerged isthmus connecting Rameswaram with the island of Mannar (identified with the causeway built by Rama and his monkey accomplices, connecting India to Ravana's island fortress of Lanka). Henry concludes by making the case that these Lankan Tamil attitudes (as well as *Ramayana*-related Tamil texts) had a direct role in shaping Sinhala Buddhist literary images of Ravana in Kandyan-period Sinhala poetry.

Sree Padma, in 'Borders Crossed: Vibhishana in the *Ramayana* and Beyond', observes that while the *Ramayana* traversed much of southern Asia to find unique cultural expressions in different locales, premodern Sri Lankan literature stands out in its selective portrayal of certain events derived from the epic, and also in its project of indigenisation of certain *Ramayana* characters (Vibhishana, most notably). Political and demographic changes from the thirteenth century introduced many gods of epic, *Puranic*, South Indian origin, including those of the *Ramayana*, into the Buddhist milieu. While the fifteenth-century cult of Rama had been conflated with the cult of Visnu, a deity who emerged as part of the *satara varan devi* (four warrant deities or guardian deities of the Sinhala nation), Padma points out that Vibhishana, the trusted ally of Rama who is understood as inheriting the kingdom of Lanka from his dead brother Ravana, and whose role in the death of Ravana is controversial, came to be worshipped by Sinhala rulers as a guardian deity in his own right, and so thereby expected to give protection to the island and its Buddhist religion. 'Borders Crossed' traces the circumstances surrounding the origin of the Vibhishana cult by amplifying the historical details. Sree Padma lays out the factors that led to the sustenance of Vibhishana's cult and his transition into the Buddhist pantheon of gods even after the contemporary emergence of the Ravana cult that has been a part of recent Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

In 'Mapping Lanka's Moral Boundaries: Representations of Socio-Political Difference in the *Ravana Rajavaliya*', Jonathan Young and Philip Friedrich provide a close reading of the *Ravana Rajavaliya* (or *Sri Lankadvipayaye Kadaim*), a c. sixteenth-century text examining one of the earliest examples of the Sinhala textual tradition that employs a narrative of Ravana. These authors explain how the *Ravana Rajavaliya* embeds the story of Ravana within a discourse of virtuous topography. The landscape the text, they argue, tells a tale of the moral decline of the Dambadeniya kingdom against the backdrop of the rise to power of the virtuous kingdoms of Gampola and Kotte, as this text would have it. The authors then consider how the text's discourse on

kingship manages a set of local political anxieties over the surge in social mobility occasioned by changing patterns of trans-regional circulation in the island's southwest during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The authors argue that the text does not represent 'others' as an undifferentiated threat, but rather in terms of proximity to and distance from a spatialised moral order. This landscape forwards desirable forms of selfhood as instruments by which ascendant social groups, many with persistent ties to South India—such as Brahmans, merchants and itinerant soldiers—were assimilated into an emerging Lankan state society. The intended contribution of the paper is to aid specialists of Sri Lankan history and religion in better understanding the historical uses of Ravana within Sinhala literary culture. More generally, the paper will help South Asianists reconsider intractable debates over the applicability of rigid notions of ethnic and religious identity in earlier historical settings, as well as the putative role of kings and kingdoms in managing such identities.

The first three contributions to this special section give a picture of diffuse and highly localised *Ramayana* mythic topographies and folkloric traditions throughout the island. In Tamil Hindu oral and textual traditions, the establishment of the major temples of Munneswaram and Koneswaram (along with various other devotional sites on the island's east coast) is associated with both Rama and Ravana. The topographical works (*kadaim* books) discussed by Young and Friedrich in this collection centre Ravana's kingdom on the island's central west coast, though there are separate traditions linking Ravana to the central highlands in the area around Sri Pada and Adam's Peak (see Henry's contribution), as well as others locating his palace in the extreme south near Hambantota, and yet others still placing the demon king's abode in the north-central Knuckles Range.³ Reconstructing a complete map of 'local *Ramayan*s' in Sri Lanka runs up against the limitation of the archives available to us, this despite scattered evidence of a highly imaginative tradition of associating local landmarks with key events and characters of the epic.⁴

With respect to recent developments, and to the continued relevance of premodern aspects of *Ramayana* culture in Sri Lanka today, contributors to this special section introduce readers to the twenty-first-century 'Ravana revival', a phenomenon over the past decade wherein Sinhala Buddhists have claimed Ravana as a distant ancestor and founder of the island's monarchy. The proposition that Ravana was a distant ancestor of the Sri Lankan Sinhala Buddhist people dates to the late nineteenth century, and presents a challenge to the hegemonic Aryan-descent narrative of the *Mahavamsa*, a Pali Buddhist chronicle of political and religious life on the island dating approximately to the sixth century CE. The focus of the fourth paper, 'Ravana's Sri Lanka: Redefining the Sinhala Nation?', by Dileepa Witharana, focuses on the recent widespread surge of interest in Ravana within the Sinhala community. This interest has reached unprecedented levels, to the point of redefining the Sinhala nation in popular public space by discarding the theory of Aryan descent reflected in the *Mahavamsa*'s myth of Vijaya's arrival and replacing it with Yakka-Ravana descent. Witharana closely examines the features of the contemporary Ravana narrative that provides the Sinhala community

3. See Jonathan Forbes, *Eleven Years in Ceylon, Vol. II* (London: Richard Bentley, 1840), pp. 104, 85–6.

4. See Anuradha Seneviratne, 'Rama and Ravana: History, Legend and Belief in Sri Lanka', in *Ancient Ceylon: Journal of the Archaeological Society of Ceylon*, Vol. 5 (1984), pp. 221–36.

with a new sense of its past. He considers the putative content of the *Vargapurnikava*, a mysterious *ola* leaf manuscript widely referenced in popular literature, and used to construct the narrative of the Yakka-Ravana descent of the Sinhalese, as well as the *Ravana Mission*, a novel connecting the ancient Yakka past to contemporary Sri Lankan politics. He also explores possible causes for this widespread surge of interest among the Sinhalese in Ravana at this particular moment of time.

The conflict between Rama and Ravana has often been interpreted historically as one between Aryan North India and the Dravidian South, for which reason the 'standard *Ramayana*' was not received with uniform enthusiasm everywhere across South Asia. Some in the South Indian Dravidian movement of the early twentieth century, for instance, rejected the *Ramayana* altogether, while others attempted to elevate Ravana to the status of a great historical figure—virtuous ruler and ardent devotee of Siva. The last paper in this collection, 'Reclaiming Ravana in Sri Lanka: Ravana's Sinhala Buddhist Apotheosis and Tamil Responses', by Pathmanesan Sanmugeswaran, Krishantha Fedricks and Justin W. Henry, considers the emergence of Ravana as a cultural hero and devotional figure among Sinhala Buddhists in the twenty-first century, along with the Tamil responses to the so called 'Sinhala Ravana' phenomenon. The authors introduce aspects of the twenty-first-century elevation of Ravana to the status of a Sinhala cultural hero, including two examples in which Ravana has achieved semi-divine status in ritual contexts at Buddhist temples. They trace the intersection of nationalist discourses employing Ravana as an essential signifier of indigeneity in the South Indian, Sri Lankan Tamil and Sinhala Buddhist contexts—including both incidental, structural similarities between such discourses as well as the direct influence of Tamil nationalist writing on twenty-first-century 'Sinhala Ravana' narratives. Pathmanesan, Fedricks and Henry conclude by outlining recent Tamil responses to the Buddhist appropriation of Ravana as a distant ancestor of the Sinhala people, relating in addition efforts on the part of Sri Lankan Tamils to employ Ravana as a conciliatory figure, exploiting him as a potential symbol of shared Sinhala and Tamil ancestry.

As editors, we hope that these contributions will motivate future literary, historical and ethnographic scholarship on this much understudied (and continually relevant) aspect of Sri Lankan religious and political life. Our special section joins a small but substantive body of literature on the legacy of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka, to which the five essays presented here are especially indebted. John Holt's pioneering monograph, *The Buddhist Visnu*,⁵ investigates the rise of the 'cult of Upulvan' in medieval Sri Lanka, representing a 'Buddhicised' version of Visnu (and often, of Visnu's incarnation as Rama). Responding to a number of pop-cultural and pseudo-scholastic dimensions of the recent 'Sinhala Ravana' phenomenon are the contributions to a 2014 special issue of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka* (Vol. 59, no. 2). In this collection of essays, several historians and archaeologists (notably Susantha Goonatilake and Malini Dias) weigh in on recent Sri Lankan government promotion of 'The Ramayana Trail', including what the authors see as worrisome misrepresentation and falsification of putative epigraphical and archaeological evidence for the historicity of the Hindu epic. The special issue also contains a helpful reference on Sri Lankan

5. John Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu: Religious Transformation, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

Ramayana folklore in the form of a posthumously reprinted essay by C.E. Godakumbura: ‘*Ramayana* in Sri Lanka and Lanka of the *Ramayana*’. Tissa Kariyawasam’s ‘The *Ramayana* and Folk Rituals of Sri Lanka’ likewise gives valuable background on the influence of the *Bala* and *Uttara Kandas* of the *Ramayana* in the ‘Kohomba Yak Kamkariya’ exorcism ritual practised in upcountry Sri Lanka.

No serious ethnographic work has yet been published on ‘The *Ramayana* Trail’, and we regret that space and expertise have not allowed us to include a more substantive discussion of the phenomenon in this collection of essays. We direct readers to the forthcoming dissertation by Deborah de Koning, ‘The Many Faces of Ravana: *Ravanisation* among Sinhalese Buddhists in Post-War Sri Lanka’ (Tilburg University), which incorporates extensive fieldwork on this fascinating set of destinations in Sri Lanka packaged for foreign Hindu tourists. De Koning’s recent essay, ‘The Ritualizing of the Martial and Benevolent Side of Ravana’,⁶ also stands as a valuable and early contribution to scholarship on the Sinhala Buddhist ‘cult of Ravana’ as it has emerged since the conclusion of the island’s civil war.

A complete understanding of the precise history and significance of various narrations of the *Ramayana* in Sri Lanka (both Sinhala and Tamil) is yet to emerge, and in many ways, the essays contained in this special section represent only a prolegomenon toward future, more in-depth research. We are grateful to the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies for sponsoring a workshop in Colombo in July 2016 during which early drafts of these papers were presented.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

6. Deborah de Koning, ‘The Ritualizing of the Martial and Benevolent Side of Ravana in Two Annual Rituals at the Sri Devram Maha Viharaya in Pannipitiya, Sri Lanka’, in *Religions*, Vol. 9, no. 250 (2018), pp. 1–24.