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Heritage and decoloniality: Reflections from Sri Lanka—A conversation

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We see from other contributions to this collection how issues of colonialism and decoloniality in different societies and regions of the world shape and reshape heritage meanings and the role that is played by differing levels of knowledge and authority—local, communal, institutional, legal, and national—in directing and redirecting perceptions of heritage. Many of the contributions share the backdrop of settler colonialism in the Americas and find solidarity at the intersection of heritage, land rights, and (dis)possession. In South Asia, it is external, or exogenous, colonialism; the exploitation of local people; and extraction of resources by an outside power for the wealth and privilege of the colonizers (Tuck and Yang, 2012) that characterize society and heritage. Here we deal specifically with Sri Lanka, an island with a long, rich, and multifaceted history that has in the last half-century experienced a brutal civil war and now lives in an uneasy and unresolved peace.

Taking inspiration from conversations that emerged during the meeting in Geneva, we have here recorded a three-way conversation that developed its own trajectories as we explored our own places in the heritage-coloniality dynamic of Sri Lanka and then the places where we found the contentions of heritage-coloniality impinging on the state of the island and its communities today. It is interesting that our conversation also alighted on the perception of a new Chinese colonialism, unknowingly picking up threads from the contribution of Florence Graezer Bideau and Pascale Bugnon in this special section. To retain the spontaneity and authenticity of our conversation in December 2022, the text is largely unedited. For anyone familiar with Sri Lanka today, the conversation as an event is as valuable as what is being said, and we hope this opens doors to more cross-community conversations.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Hasini Haputhanthri: best known as a development professional and arts manager, Hasini collaborates with a global network of researchers and practitioners on peace-building, arts, and heritage management in Sri Lanka, South Africa, Lebanon, and many other places. Her current focus is on reinventing museums as sites of representation, innovative pedagogy, and civic engagement.

Gill Juleff: Gill has worked in Sri Lanka and South Asia for almost 40 years. Her primary research has been in the archaeology of iron- and steel-making, and her work on the first-millennium wind-powered furnaces of Samanalawewa put Sri Lanka on the international stage. More recently, Gill has developed interests in the historical and postwar archaeology of the Jaffna Peninsula.

Thamotharampillai Sanathanan: born in Jaffna, Sanathanan's art practice traces loss, memory, home, and the self. His work involves various disciplines, research, documentation, and oral history that explore complex issues related to Sri Lanka's civil war. His works such as *The Incomplete Thombu* (Shanaathanan, 2011) and "Cabinet of Resistance"[1] are today some of the most recognized artistic representations of Jaffna and its recent history.

THE CONVERSATION

GJ: Thank you for joining this conversation, I'm really pleased you're both here. Each of us comes from a different background, but our work and interests have brought us together in recent years around aspects of heritage and decoloniality. It is important to say at the start that this is a conversation, not an interview. Essentially, the aim is to explore the intersections between heritage and decoloniality (or coloniality) as they relate to our own experiences and Sri Lanka. There is a growing debate around these topics in the West, as the West catches up with the rest of the world in realizing that heritage and coloniality intertwine and have impact on each other. I thought we could start by saying a little about ourselves, our backgrounds, and how we have personally arrived at the viewpoints we have at the moment.

As you know, I'm an archaeologist. I trained in the late 1970s at the Institute of Archaeology in London, which is now part of UCL. The Institute of Archaeology was a prestigious institution, which, when I first went there, was alive with the legacy and even the personalities of people like Sir Mortimer Wheeler, Dame Kathleen Kenyon, Sir Max Mallowen, and other well-known names of pre- and post-WWII archaeology—people who had made their reputations excavating great sites across the globe. Kathleen Kenyon was the excavator of Jericho, and Mortimer Wheeler excavated at Arikamedu in South India and at Mohenjo Daro, the Indus Valley civilization site in Pakistan, as well as in Britain.

This was the environment I trained in, surrounded by people who went to the far-flung corners of the world and had amazing adventures. We were trained to be objective and scientific, professional and evidence-based. At the time, I knew I was lucky to be in that environment. Now, looking back, I understand better the level of entitlement and privilege that went along with that training, how it reflected the very essence of colonialism. As a student, I had worked in North Yemen, which was an incredible experience and made me realize I wanted to see the world. In the mid-1980s, I had the opportunity to come to Sri Lanka, first to work with a big, international excavation team at the port site of Mantai, on the northwest coast at Tirukketiswaram, near Mannar. That was an old-style excavation campaign very much like those I was familiar with from the Institute of Archaeology. I then moved on to Anuradhapura and the Cultural Triangle project to work for a number of years on the big World Heritage sites of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Kandy, Dambulla, and Sigiriya (Figure 1). I was young. It was just the greatest adventure of my life. I made friends. I enjoyed life and learning about a new country and history.

In the mid-1980s, Sri Lanka was sliding into civil war, and I was aware of what was happening at a day-to-day level. I was also aware of the broad political issues underlying the civil war, and being in Mannar and Anuradhapura, and Polonnaruwa, I was physically close to the war and the front line. So, I knew the situation, but I didn't necessarily connect the two—archaeology and the conflict. It's only through being involved in Sri Lanka over a long time, having many friends and connections, and through my own maturity, that I have come to recognize how profound and problematic the connection is. And I also recognized that I had been within and part of a state-authorized narrative of heritage that controlled how heritage is presented to the people of the country and to the world at large. That led to me wanting to know more about the reality of how people perceive and respond to heritage.

HH: I come from a very different route to the same point that Gill finds herself in. I was born and brought up in Sri Lanka. Black July 1983 happened when I was three years old. By the time I was eight, I had witnessed a lot of violence in the south, perpetrated by the JVP (Peoples Liberation Party) and the government. Although what was happening in the north of the island was distant, it was always present. I grew up with war being the backdrop of my life, perhaps not to the same intensity as somebody living in the north and east of Sri Lanka, and I probably approached it from a very southern Sri Lankan perspective at that time. But it was pretty much a reality. I grew up with war, and the war grew up with me. It escalated and escalated and escalated.

Later, I trained as a sociologist in South Asia and in the West. When I returned, I started working on a conflict-transformation project with a focus on culture. I got involved with arts and cultural initiatives aimed at peace-building. It was an amazing entry point into exploring the root causes of conflict. That is how I ended up working with history and heritage, which led me to examine nationalism, which is inextricable from the colonial experience. For me, decolonization is intricately linked to conflict transformation. In fact, I can only look at it from that perspective. The colonial experience is the precursor of the reality that I'm engaged with, I'm responding to, and what I'm trying to change at present. I'm keen to listen to how Sana approaches this, because while initially I approached it from a very southern perspective, the work usually transforms you, and you start looking at it from a different point of view. It was in fact a privilege to be able to open up to another perspective. Consequently, I trained in museology and started focusing on museum education and how the colonial experience affects how we look at our own past. For example, consider history teaching. Museums are linked to colonial archaeology. With this awareness, I can bring a criticality to the conversations that we are having about past and present conflicts.

TS: As you know, I trained as a visual artist and art historian. My interest in heritage was shaped by the politics of heritage in "postcolonial" Sri Lanka. Like colonialism before it, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism appropriated as its own the heritage of a multiethnic and multicultural precolonial society. Through this process, minorities are made stateless. As a person who belongs to one of those minority communities, I was led to believe that I have no roots in this country, culturally and historically. This mindset was fed by state-sponsored narratives of history and heritage, especially through school textbooks. Later, the government targeted the historical and cultural sites of the minorities. The most powerful example was the burning of the Jaffna public library by government forces in 1981. Heritage sites and properties were common targets during riots against minorities and

FIGURE 1 (top) War-damaged and abandoned nineteenth-century townhouse in Jaffna; (middle) Jetawana, Ruwanwelisya, and Abhayagiriya stupas rising above treetops at dawn, Anuradhapura World Heritage Site; (bottom) National Museum, Colombo. (Courtesy of authors) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

the civil war. Local leaders and the people consider these acts as "cultural genocide." Against this background, I joined the University of Jaffna as a lecturer in art history! At the beginning, I wasn't sure what the role of art history in local society, and my mission as an artist and art historian, could be. I was thinking, "What am I doing here?" That was 1998, when there was a mass exodus of the wealthy classes from Jaffna. The big houses were abandoned with all their contents; there was confusion and abductions in white vans. Within a short time, I began to realize the urgency of documenting heritage objects in danger of disappearance—colonial architecture of different kinds, iconic glass paintings, nineteenth-century oleograph prints and day-to-day objects—and that gave me an agency to work with. I felt a deep nostalgia for a society that existed before the war, and my work became about documenting a memory, a past, nostalgia and melancholia. Only later did I realize this was also heritage and was a tool I could use to resist dominance and narrate history in a different way.

In 2002, when the land route between Colombo and Jaffna was reopened after nearly a decade, the Colombo antique market entered Jaffna and started Hoovering up all the artifacts. That led us to respond by launching a house-to-house campaign of heritage awareness and protection. Hence, the ground situation pushed me toward heritage. Through my growing interest in heritage, influenced by the war/postwar situation, I have started questioning the silences in the written art history of Sri Lanka. These silences relate not only to ethnicity but also to gender, religion, caste, and material. In this context, craft became a point of entry to destabilize the dominant discourse of heritage that is based on the Buddhist archaeological sites of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa in the center of the island.

HH: Can I ask a question, Sanathanan? Do you have insight into how people from Jaffna felt about the change of colonial administration? Perhaps the experience in the north during the British rule was different to that of the south? The south may feel like we gained independence in 1948, but perhaps the north continued to feel colonized, simply by a different group of people. How can we redefine the word "colonialism" in this context? I'm trying to find different ways of understanding the "colonial" that is more contextual than just equating colonialism to white domina-

tion. It is really about power and powerlessness. How did people in the north experience British colonialism and Sinhala nationalism in the last century?

TS: The British created Sri Lanka as a separate country. Before their rule, there was no Sri Lanka, or India. Even under Dutch administration, Sri Lanka was not a single political entity. Throughout history, Jaffna was under many political powers, from the south of peninsular India to the south of the Island of Sri Lanka and to Europe. During Portuguese, times the Church of Jaffna was under the Church of Goa, and sometimes Cochin. According to local historians, Jaffna was a flourishing business hub before Sri Lanka's independence, with multiple ports open to the world. After independence, Jaffna was forced to disconnect its international links and became dependent on the capital in Colombo, with all movement and contact through Colombo. Similarly, after independence, it feels like all Sri Lanka's history becomes a linear narration from the center, delinking connections and communities, and the shared culture and heritage became the sole property of one community.

One issue discussed in Sri Lankan media today is the danger of Sri Lanka becoming a Chinese colony. Some people also predict the north and east parts of Sri Lanka may amalgamate with India in the future. But, as one of my friends sarcastically comments, Jaffna's position would not change by changing the colonial power.

HH: Responding to that, we also have very heated arguments in the south about becoming a Chinese colony. People reconsider and compare British rule to present circumstances. Wasn't being a colony under the British a better experience than being ruined by corrupt leaders that we've had for the last 70 years? At present, some even question "the cost of independence" in transferring power into the hands of an elite and increasingly corrupt local leadership. The idea of colonization is very present in the discourse right now but is understood in different ways.

GJ: I'm listening to Sana talking about the early and precolonial European periods, when your island's connections were so diverse and dispersed, and communities had autonomy to connect with places in southern India and beyond, and reflecting also on what you said about perceptions of heritage and the dominance of the monumental sites in the center of the island. British colonialism is the turning point, when the dynamics changed from a social and trading network, where everyone gained from those connections between ports and people and goods, to a new sense of ownership. Ceylon suddenly belongs to the British, as does India, and they are one and the same—British territories. And then you talked about things being linear and simplistic and I think the simplistic narrative was the way the British managed the complexity and diversity of these new territories. They needed to rationalize and simplify the story: give it a narrative that could be understood by the British. So they created the idea that "Anuradhapura represents Ceylon, these monuments are Ceylon," early British archaeologists tell that story and make it plausible to the British. That simplification then ultimately becomes labeled as heritage, *the* heritage of Ceylon, and subsequently *the* heritage of Sri Lanka. This becomes the legacy, a massive footprint that leaves an imprint on what we are discussing in terms of current politics, and present-day responses to heritage, as you were describing Sanathanan. How do you find your place in that dominant narrative? I'm interested, Sana, that you describe the things you felt were relevant to you as being nostalgic and triggering memory. That implies those things don't qualify as heritage. What bar do you have to reach for something to become heritage, and who sets the bar? That's what I'm interested in teasing out with our work together in Jaffna, along with how we might move the bar, or the perception of the bar, so that something doesn't have to be big and visible, or a commodity, or connected to written history to become heritage. It's about recoding heritage.

TS: That's a very interesting question. Sri Lankan anthropologist Pradeep Jeganathan (1995), in his seminal essay on the city of Anuradhapura, unearths multiple colonial and national discourses that construct Anuradhapura as a sacred city. The idea of heritage is a product of colonial knowledge and institutions. It is also structured by international conventions and national expectations. Without addressing the power dynamics operating within/through the conception of heritage, without changing the rules of the game, we won't be able to decolonize its meaning. We may be independent of colonial rule, but our knowledge system is still colonized. Designating heritage is also connected to the power structure, and the current designation of heritage is an act of distancing and othering. In this context, what was the meaning of heritage to subaltern communities? For them, the heritage may become a point of resistance.

HH: I think the global discourse was late in recognizing intangible cultural heritage as an important aspect of the past. Various community traditions, drama, performance, and visual art practices, music, festivals, and rituals are now recognized as intangible cultural heritage. Naming and proper acknowledgment play a big role in what gets counted as heritage and what doesn't. Going back to the question Gill raised; Who decides what is heritage? I have a couple of insights from my research on the history of the Government Department of Archaeology and the National Museums. Historically, museums and institutions like the Department of Archaeology played a huge role in deciding what's heritage. They do so still today. These institutions are colonial establishments. For example, the National Museum Colombo was established in 1877, and the Department of Archaeology in 1890, when the British Empire sprawled across Asia and established similar institutions in its colonies. To echo Gill's explanation, the British were trying to understand the world through a simplified framework. They thrust this framework upon regions like South Asia and Africa. The diversity of these places overwhelmed the coloniser who invented nomenclatures, categories and classification systems to comprehend the incomprehensible. They understood India as Hindu and Ceylon as Buddhist, and suddenly everything in Sri Lanka became Buddhist. When institu-

tions like the Department of Archaeology or Colombo Museum started, heritage was defined as Buddhist. British archaeologists went looking for Buddhist statues because Sri Lanka was already defined as a Buddhist country, as against Hindu India. When Hindu deities such as Siva, Vishnu, and Sivakamasundari were excavated in Polonnaruwa, it was a surprise. There was no space to accommodate Hindu deities because the framework was fixed as Buddhist. Not questioning such institutional frameworks is very problematic because they are the "namer of names," they define things, and that's a very powerful thing to be left in the hands of archaic bureaucratic institutions that haven't undergone review or change for decades.

TS: What Hasini was underlining here is the problem of working/reworking with a colonial system of knowledge.

HH: We inherit these traditions, names, and perspectives. We are inculcated through history lessons in the classroom. Your imagination is "colonized" because history is a colonial discipline, as opposed to learning about your village through the memories of your grandparents or your community. You go to school and an institution tells you that this is your history. Incidentally, the education system is rooted in missionary education and is also colonial. These institutions perpetuate colonialism, even though the British left the island over 70 years ago. How do we bring a sense of reflection and critical thinking into engaging with such colonial institutions—into questioning them, so they are pressurized to transform, to serve current issues and situations. How do we get institutions like universities, schools, and museums to address the diversity of Sri Lanka? To accommodate minority histories, instead of just having a separate little museum for a "minority" community here and there while continuing with a "national" museum that displays a Buddhist ethos. Decolonization, for me, is really about asking critical questions and getting institutions to change.

TS: Actually questioning the canon is more important than accommodating random objects and practices into the existing one. By continuing our engagement with the colonial canon without criticality, we are reproducing and multiplying the same disparities.

GJ: This seems radical but important. This is the deep legacy of colonialism, and it is not easy to move away from because perhaps we don't quite know what a decolonized framework looks like.

We've covered a lot of ground exploring the impact of colonial and state-authorized heritage on society in Sri Lanka. Returning to personal experience, one of the things that has stayed in my mind and is the reason why I am engaged with the debate now are those first encounters we had in 2019 with the young people in Jaffna. I know this is an anecdote, but it was for me a real turning point. I had understood intellectually the need for redress, and I had come to the realization that I had been part of an apparatus that distorted and biased the heritage narrative, even though I believed I was myself being scientifically objective. But it came into acute focus when we sat down together in Jaffna and for the first time I heard people saying, "What use is archaeology to us? It has been used as a weapon against us." This is not something that archaeologists are accustomed to hearing. Archaeology is rarely confrontational, but these young people were heartfelt in saying that archaeological heritage has been and still is used as a weapon. This was their lived experience, not intellectual argument or debate. It is the outcome of all that we are talking about, and it was disturbing that my academic profession has had this impact on society.

TS: I was in that discussion. In postwar Sri Lanka, memorialization, archaeology, and heritage became weapons to threaten minority rights. The government supports archaeology projects that support Sinhala Buddhist ideology. There have been good alternative projects, like Hasini's book that discusses important heritage sites in Sri Lanka as sites of multicultural exchange, and the mobile museum set up with Hasini and GIZ that traveled around the country. These initiatives make us revisit the colonialists' and nationalists' methods and interpretations, but my concern is whether they are powerful enough to change the official narratives of state institutions.

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Our conversation continued, discussing institutionalized colonialism, archaeological ethics, and the changes we thought could help to rebalance perceptions of heritage within Sri Lanka. On reflection now, the most illuminating element of this conversation was not what was said but the event of the conversation and its rhythm. Despite being three friends and colleagues with a high degree of mutual trust, we were each acutely aware of our own ethnic and cultural origins and even more of how our different communities have been responsible for inflicting pain and harm on others. At the outset we spoke carefully, determined to be open and honest but wary of offending.

To understand perceptions of heritage today across Sri Lanka, we probed further and further back into European colonialism and regional histories. But we also found ourselves challenging the simplicity of the European-Asian model of colonialism when we thought about legacies of colonialism in the relationships between minority Tamil and majority Sinhalese communities and current colonialism of the relationship between Sri Lanka and China.

Having established a forum that felt safe, we moved toward reinforcing our common ground and looking beyond ourselves to others, most notably heritage institutions, museums, and government departments. This was perhaps the point at which the conversation turns more complicated. When we feel safe enough together to look beyond and see challenges for transformation in others.

ENDNOTE

[1] https://smritidaniel.com/2017/03/01/t-shanaathanan-a-cabinet-of-resistance/

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