



ISSN 1076-9005
Volume 3 1996: 171-174
Publication date: 20 July 1996

The Presence of the Past : Chronicles, Politics and Culture in Sinhala Life. Steven Kemper, The Wilder House Series in Politics, History and Culture. Ithaca, N.Y. and London : Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. xiv +244 pages, ISBN: 0-8014-2395-3, US \$29.95.

Reviewed by

Nirmala S. Salgado

Augustana College
resalgado@augustana.edu

© 1996 Nirmala S. Salgado

Copyright Notice

Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no charge is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format with the exception of a single copy for private study requires the written permission of the editors. All enquiries to jbe-ed@psu.edu.

Kemper's study seeks to address the debate on the birth of nationalism by focusing on the nature of the emergence of a distinctive Sinhala-Buddhist identity in Sri Lanka. He discusses the shortcomings of theoretical interpretations of history and nationalism and attempts to provide an alternative. Kemper unravels the historicity of events and the characterization of heroes depicted in the "chronicle" literature, assessing the intentions of the many authors of the *Mahāvamsa*, a work recording the history of the island that was begun in the 6th century by the monk Mahānāma and was extended several times (most recently in 1977). In doing so, he demonstrates, among other things, the power of the trope of unity as a central agent that has contributed towards the formation of the notion of a Sinhala-Buddhist identity.

Kemper's theoretical criticisms of previous interpretations of nationalism in works by Kedourie, Anderson, Gellner and Hobsbawn rests on the assertion that "these approaches to nationalism shortchange the complex relationship between the past and the present by virtue of their common attitude toward consciousness" (p. 4.) Thus, he criticizes Anderson for ignoring "who these people were who invented and propagated these new conceptions" (p. 5) that gave rise to nationalism and he criticizes Gellner for neglecting the possibility that "modern nations draw on the past in a way that is not altogether arbitrary" (p.6). These scholars' neglect of "culture and consciousness" is one that Kemper attempts to address in his study of Sinhala identity. In his work, Kemper is also critical of scholars such as Kapferer and Gombrich for maintaining a direct continuity between the past and the present. For Kemper, this relationship is a complex one that involves both continuities and discontinuities. The use of the past in the present he argues, is by no means arbitrary and this is what he seeks to prove.

Kemper demonstrates that specific identities are "textualized" when "narrative structure and political motivation come together" (p.21). His investigation is limited to the literature concerning Sinhala and Buddhist identity only. (There is little discussion of the notion of a distinctive Tamil nationalism). Kemper argues that although the notion of a Sinhala-Buddhist identity emerged recently, the formation of "textual identities" in the depiction of the ancient kings etc., was such that it allowed for the apparent nurturing of this ethnic identity.

Kemper's examination of the *Mahāvamsa*, albeit limited mainly to secondary sources and, in some cases, the translations of others, is undertaken with care. His study deciphers the re-creation of the past in the present by examining 1) the context of the authorship of the *Mahāvamsa* itself, 2) the *Mahāvamsa* delineation of the careers and the formation of "textual

identities” of the three most prominent Kings in the first part of the *Mahāvamsa*: Vijaya, Duṭṭegemunu and Parākramabāhu, in relation to historical reality; 3) the nineteenth century debates among historians and nationalists on views of Sri Lanka’s “past;” 4) popular uses of arguments concerning the “past;” 5) the identification and renovation of relics and sacred places as an expression of nationalist consciousness and 6) how the trope of unity depicted throughout the *Mahāvamsa* is transformed and interpreted in the present where there is a shift of focus from the unity of heroic leadership of the ancient kings to that of the common person today. Finally, using the Sri Lankan example, Kemper demonstrates that nationalism is not simply a Western import but rather “... the production of culture accommodating foreign influence in the same way it accommodates the local past, reimagining both at the same time.” (p. 25).

Kemper explains how the trope of unity in the *Mahāvamsa* becomes a dominant common characteristic associated with the three main kings of the chronicle. King Vijaya and King Duṭṭegemunu symbolize unity by appearing to rule a politically centralized Lanka, and by wielding authority in the name of the Buddha. King Parākramabāhu, who also seems to bring the island under a centralized authority, additionally appears to create unity among otherwise dissenting monks. Kemper demonstrates that this notion of unity is not reflective of the political and historical reality of these kings’ reigns. Nevertheless, the trope of unity, portrayed in different ways in the *Mahāvamsa*, becomes useful as the “modern invocation of the need for unity resonates with the traditional usage and takes its force from this resonance” (p. 16). Unity, he argues, is important not just in the *Mahāvamsa* but in canonical and non-canonical Buddhist scriptures as well as in the structure and organization of the Buddhist monastic community and current political rhetoric. While his emphasis on the importance of unity provides a useful hermeneutic, Kemper overlooks important facets of Sri Lankan society today. For example, on the one hand, he largely ignores the disunity due to the caste distinctions within the Sangha; and on the other hand, he overlooks the goals and activities of the Sarvodaya movement which might have strengthened his argument concerning unity.

With respect to the sources he draws upon, Kemper does do a good job of deciphering how the perceptions of the past have been encoded in present reality. However, his study is not without shortcomings. One wonders why he neglects the inclusion of recent scholarship on Buddhism in Sri Lanka such as A.H. Mirando’s *Buddhism in Sri Lanka in the 17th and 18th centuries* (1985), and G. Bond’s *Buddhist Revival in Sri Lanka* (1988). There is no mention of *The Ethnic Conflict: Myths, Realities and Perspectives* (1984), written by Sri Lankans as a response to the ethnic violence of

1983. A discussion of this work would have been valuable in his Chapter 4, “Contesting the Past”, that focuses on popular Sri Lankan interpretations of the *Mahāvamsa* in the recent past and the formation of ethnic identities. It is disappointing that Kemper’s reference to the ethnic violence of “August 1983” (he probably means July 1983) is only a passing one. Some of Kemper’s suggestions, e.g., that the Ājīvikas are “an ascetic order that resembled Mahāyāna” p. 51, footnote 50 and his assumption that the Damiḷas of the *Mahāvamsa* are Tamils, are problematic. While the discussion of Seruvila as a place that symbolized the emergence of present day Sinhala ethnicity by its growing identification as a place sacred to Sinhala Buddhists is valuable, no reference is made to Obeyesekere’s study of a very similar process that has taken place in Kataragama. Similarly, although he recognizes the symbolic power of the Bodhi Tree, he fails to integrate the importance of the literature concerning that tree, such as the *Mahābodhivamsa* and *Cullabodhivamsa*, either in his discussion of “chronicle” literature or in his section on sacred space.

Kemper’s claim that the *Mahāvamsa* circulated exclusively among the elite and the monastic community is problematic. On the one hand, he mentions that the written account of the *Mahāvamsa* “... could not have been widely known in a peasant society” p. 80 Why not? Following his logic that a Pāli text could not be widely known would also lead to the argument that the Buddhist *gāthās* could not be widely known, unless one understands and knows how to read the text. One is also led to question the significance of this claim, and whether the distinction between the written and the oral tradition of the *Mahāvamsa* as suggested by Kemper is really as important as he seems to argue.

Kemper’s work appropriately underscores the extent to which *Mahāvamsa* themes factor in the context of the current debate centering on the status of a nationalist identity that is simultaneously Buddhist and Sinhala. Despite its shortcomings, his study makes an important contribution to studies in the construction of nationalism. Although his discussion of the *Mahāvamsa* and its relevance to ethnic identity today offers little that is new to specialists of Sri Lanka (these issues have been hotly debated in Sri Lankan circles in the past decades), it does bring to the subject matter a theoretical framework which contextualizes the material in thoughtful and provocative ways. This book remains an important resource for students in the fields of history, anthropology, religion, politics and South Asian studies. It is a must for libraries serving undergraduates and graduates.