

A critical analysis of ancient Sinhalese textbooks obstructing interfaith tolerance in 19th century colonial Sri Lanka

With special reference to Heḷadiw Rajaniya (*The History of Ceylon*) and Laṅkā Wistraya (*Geography of Ceylon*), 1853

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The 1853 Sinhalese textbooks *Heḷadiw Rajaniya* (*The History of Ceylon from the earliest period to the present time*) and *Laṅkā Wistraya* (*Geography of Ceylon for the use of schools*) derived from different authors but ultimately espoused a similar agenda in 19th century colonial Sri Lanka. Although the general aim of these works was to provide subject knowledge to Sinhalese school children, they implicitly and sometimes explicitly advanced missionary ideologies that served to undermine interfaith tolerance in colonial Sri Lanka. *Heḷadiw Rajaniya* (HR) was published under the direction of the Central School Commission by John Pereira, a well-known journal editor and headmaster of the Native Normal Institution. Even though John Pereira incorporates ancient chronicles such as the Mahāvamsa and the Rājāvaliya, he denounces particular teachings as fantastical mythical creations, particularly stories concerning the Buddha's connection to Sri Lanka and the thoughts of Arahāt Mahinda. When Pereira describes the famous *Kelaṇiya* Buddhist temple, he metaphorically associates Buddhism with darkness and Christianity with light. Though he uses venerable terms for Dutch and British governors, no such appellations are deployed in reference to the Buddha and Hindu deities such as Viṣṇu and Pattini. A hidden copy of the *Laṅkā Wistraya* (LW) has recently been found by this researcher, and can be considered the oldest existing Sinhala Geography textbook in Sri Lanka. According to the book, the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha and the mythicization of Adam's peak are artificial creations, and Kataragama is a fake deity. Śrī Maha Bodhi is also considered a standard Bō tree. In addition, the text warns that when Buddhist and Hindu practitioners make pilgrimages to religious sites, they suffer fevers and sometimes face death. Though only one edition of HR is available, LW has several known editions. It is important to note that the 1889 ninth edition of LW has substantial differences from the first edition in offering particular concessions to Buddhism and Hinduism in an attempt to assuage interfaith tensions.

Key words: Heḷadiw Rajaniya, Laṅkā Wistraya, interfaith tolerance, religious harmony, assuage

Introduction

After overtaking the entire country in 1815, British colonists started to implement a host of policies governing colonized peoples in Sri Lanka. Under these policies, native people were considered uncivilized and uneducated. Colonists took many steps to civilize colonized peoples, including the promotion of the Christian religion, English language, and broader aspects of British culture. Missionary activities played a considerable role among this hegemonic project, and served to obstruct the religious harmony that existed in 19th century Sri Lanka.

The first English mission society to arrive in Ceylon was the London Missionary Society, which came to the island in 1804/5. This group was followed by Baptist missionaries (1812), Wesleyan Methodists (1814/5), and the Church Missionary Society (1818).¹ As Kingsley M. De Silva elucidates, “The early missionaries were primarily preachers, and the first problem that faced them was that of language.”² They were soon able to overcome these barriers, however, by learning Sinhala and producing religious texts in the Sinhala language so as to appeal to a native audience. The missionaries leveraged the three major avenues of education, preaching, and the press in their efforts to diffuse Christianity across Ceylon.³ The earliest Sinhala journals including, ‘*The Monthly Reward*’ (1832), ‘*Laṅkā Nidhānaya*’ (*The Treasure of Ceylon*) (1839), ‘*Uragala*’ (*The Touchstone*) (1842), and ‘*Wistrakarannā*’ (*The Commentator*) (1844), were published strategically for missionaries purposes.⁴ Aside from Bible translations, many other missionary books and pamphlets were disseminated in thousands of copies such as *Swargaya Genaya* (*On Heaven*) (1860), *Vīda Nohot Bolda* (*Wheat or Chaff?*) (1861), *Tamangē Asalwāsīn Maerū Miniḥā Genaya* (*The Man Who Killed his Neighbors*) (1870) and *Kristiyāni Prajñaptiya* (*The Evidences and Doctrines of the Christian Religion*) (1876).⁵ Governor Torrington’s writing in 1848 demonstrates this expedient strategy in stating that, “Education is the best preparation for conversion to Christianity.”⁶ Furthermore, Mary and Margaret W. Leitch encapsulate the missionary

¹ Kingsley M. De. Silva. (1969), "Influence of the English Evangelical movement on Education in Ceylon " *Education in Ceylon, Part II*, Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, Ceylon, 376- 377pp.

² *ibid*, 377p.

³ Kitsiri Malalgoda, (1976), *Buddhism in Sinhalese Society 1750-1900*, University of California Press, 232p.

⁴ John Murdoch and James Nicholson (1868), *Classified Catalogue of Printed Tracts and Books in Singhalese*, Foster press, Madras, 46-47pp.

⁵ Christian Vernacular Education Society, 1860; Christian Vernacular Education Society, 1861; Ceylon Religious Tract Society, 2nd Edition, 1870; Christian Vernacular Education Society, 1876

⁶ Kingsley M. De. Silva- *ibid*- 378p.

worldview in *Seven Years in Ceylon* with the assertion that, ‘like the banyan tree, the Kingdom of Christ seems to be growing and extending here, taking deep root downward, and sending new shoots upward.’⁷

Spreading Christianity among the elderly was a particularly difficult task, because these people had lived for many years in a predominantly Buddhist society. On the other hand, converting younger students to Christianity proved to be a relatively easier task, and missionaries therefore imbued textbooks with particularly slanted ideologies. Textbooks were ostensibly produced to provide subject knowledge, but implicitly and sometimes explicitly advanced a Christian religious agenda that served to undermine the interfaith tolerance that existed previously in colonial Sri Lanka. This paper will examine the paradigmatic textbooks known as *Heḷadiw Rajaniya* (HR) and *Laṅkā Wistraya* (LW), which derive from different authors and subject matters, but ultimately espouse a similar missionary agenda.

Heḷadiw Rajaniya

Heḷadiw Rajaniya (HR), or *The History of Ceylon from the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, was published in 1853 by John Pereira, the headmaster of the Native Normal Institution. The book was printed and published under the direction of the Central School Commission at the Wesleyan Mission Press, containing 331 pages and 20 chapters. At the end of each chapter, there is a list of questions intended for student responses. Moreover, in explaining historical matters, the author uses footnotes to comment on the contemporary situations of each of the places, which allows him to portray a Christian relevance to the given subject areas. There are particular historical inaccuracies included as well, such as the notion that *Arhat Mahinda* came to Sri Lanka on a full moon day in *Wesak* (May), and the assertion that Kingdom of Sri Lanka shifted to *Dambadeṇiya* after *Kuruṇṅāgala*.⁸ The conventionally accepted date of the arrival of *Arhat Mahinda* was actually a full moon day during *Poson* (June), and the Kingdom moved to *Gampōla* after *Kuruṇṅāgala*.⁹ The author of the book, John Pereira, was also a well-known journal editor, publishing three journals called *Śāstra Nidhānaya* (*The Treasure of Sciences*) (1846), *Śāstrālaṃkāraya* (*The Beauty of Sciences*) (1853) and *Siyabaslakari* (*The Beauty of the Mother Tongue*).¹⁰ The literary

⁷ Mary and Margaret W. Leitch (1890) *Seven years in Ceylon -stories of Mission life*, S. W. Partridge & Co, London, 64p.

⁸ HR- 59p.

⁹ *ibid*, 189p.

¹⁰ K.Paññasekara (1965), *Sinhala Puwatpat Sangarā Itihāsaya* –Vol. I, (History of Sinhalese news-papers and journals, Vol. I), M.D Gunasena, Colombo, 18p.

historian *P. B. Sannasgala* claims that HR can be considered the first history textbook in the series of modern history books, and he maintains that it is useful in corroborating particular historical events.¹¹

Laṅkā Wistraya

John Murdoch and James Nicholson discuss *Laṅkā Wistraya* (LW) in their famous 1868 catalogue, *Classified Catalogue of Printed Tracts and Books in Singhalese*.¹² The full name of the book is *Laṅkā Wistraya*, or *The Geography of Ceylon for the Use of Schools*. LW was published in 1853 by The Singhalese Tract Society in Kandy, and although the name of the author is not indicated, evidence in the text suggests that he or she was a foreign missionary who learned Sinhala and retained considerable knowledge about the country. The authors John Murdoch and James Nicholson indicate in the text that 2nd and 3rd editions of this book appeared in 1857 and 1863 respectively.¹³ Although these editions are still hidden, the ninth edition of the book published in 1889 is still available in Sri Lankan libraries.¹⁴ A hidden original copy of LW (1853) has recently been found by this researcher, and can be considered the oldest existing Sinhala geography textbook in Sri Lanka. While the ninth edition has a world map, the first publication does not include any map aside from an illustration of The Queen of England and her family on the first page. LW has 64 pages and 12 chapters, and the end of the each chapter includes questions intended to be answered by students.

Discussion

HR provides descriptions of Sri Lankan history from the earliest time to the British colonial period. The author refers to some chronicles such as the *Mahāwamsa*, *Attanagaluwamsa*, *Pūjāvaliya*, *Nikāya Saṅgrahaya*, and the *Rājāvaliya* in his analysis of the early history of the island. Although he references ancient chronicles, however, he renders some teachings of the chronicles as fantastical mythical creations. In fact, he uses square brackets around particular phrases to delineate what he considers to be mythical creations, such as stories from the *Mahāvamsa* and other chronicles, purportedly to communicate their imaginative nature even to unwise people. With reference to the *Mahāvamsa* and *Rājāvaliya* stories of the Buddha

¹¹ P.B. Sannasgala (2009 Reprint), *Sinhala Sāhitya Wamsaya* (History of Singhalese Literature), S. Godage Brothers, Colombo, 634p.

¹² John Murdoch and James Nicholson (1868), *Classified Catalogue of Printed Tracts and Books in Singhalese*, Foster Press, Madras, 42p

¹³ *ibid*, 42p.

¹⁴ This edition printed for the Christian Vernacular Education Society, at the Wesleyan Mission Press.

visiting Sri Lanka three times, HR author says that these myths are unbelievable.¹⁵ Sixteen of the names of the most sacred Buddhist places in the country, often in the context of the arrival of the Buddha to Sri Lanka, have also been enclosed by square brackets.¹⁶ Moreover, the story of the Buddha ordering the god *Śakra* to protect Prince *Vijaya* and his people, and the god *Śakra* appealing to the god *Upulwan* to protect them, is also debased as mythical. In this manner, all references to the Buddha in factual Sri Lankan history have been neglected or excluded. And furthermore, though the author accepts the historical validity of the arrival of *Arhat Mahinda* to Sri Lanka, some of the thoughts attributed to *Mahinda* before coming to the island are confined within brackets.¹⁷

The author of HR gives particular attention to Buddhist and Hindu religious sites, which retained great popularity in his contemporary era. For instance, when he addresses the historical importance of *Kelaniya*, he uses a footnote to describe *Kelaniya* temple:

“*Kelaniya* temple has been a famous place where Buddhist come to pilgrimage. Thousands of Buddhists who are coming from various places in country gather for worship *Wesak* full moon day and next months as well. It has two churches belong to Roman Catholic and reformed and a school built by government. Sometime, within a short period when make *Kelaniya* brightness by the light named Christianity, dispelling the darkness named Buddhism, having opened all eyes, and realized unintelligence so far followed themselves, people might sorrow thinking their past activities.”¹⁸

Along with his condemnation of the *Kelaniya* temple, the author carefully emphasizes the churches and missionary schools situated around the island. He mentions that Negombo has three Roman Catholic churches under the auspices of the Wesleyan Mission, Batticaloa has six schools under the Wesleyan Mission, *Mātara* has a few schools belonging to the Wesleyan mission, *Pāṇadura* has a Wesleyan church, and *Kōtte* contains a church mission and school.¹⁹ It is quite clear that the author privileges the particular churches and schools coordinated by the Wesleyan Mission, which was not coincidentally the institution under which HR was printed.

¹⁵ HR 18-20pp.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 20p.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 59p

¹⁸ *ibid*, 62p.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 73,90,93,192,194 p.

Furthermore, the author references the Buddha using the terms *budun* (simply ‘Buddha’) and *budunge* (simply ‘Buddha’s’), without any of the appellations customarily used to convey respect to the religious figure. He employs similarly simple language when referring to gods and goddess such as *Viṣṇu*, *Nātha* and *Pattini*. In contrast, the author uses venerable terms for Dutch and British governors such as *Utumānan Wahansē* (‘venerable sir’), which communicates a bias toward the stature of such figures. Moreover, he even uses an exalting stanza in Sanskrit under the name of Sir Robert Browrigg.²⁰

Although the precise subject matter is different in the textbook, *Laṅkā Wistraya* (LW), its overall message has notable affinities to that of HR. In fact, LW may well exceed HR in its assault on religious harmony and tolerance. According to the book, the sacrality of the tooth relic of the Buddha as well as the mythical importance of Adam’s peak are outright, artificial creations. The author states,

“There is a palace where keep a something named the sacred tooth relic of the Buddha. It has been searched by European and they think, it as an Ivory piece which was color changed because of time. People daily worship and offer presents. Other people who are following different religion consider this as a serious unwiseess.”²¹

The author then proceeds to assert that,

“From north side of *Sabaragamuwa*, 71 miles from Colombo, it is situated the mountain named *Samanala*. This one is the fourth highest mountain in Sri Lanka. Its top appears pointed shape... devotees are coming from distance part of the country in a long time, thinking this top has a foot mark. Buddhists say it as a Buddha foot mark, while Hindus says it belongs to god Siva and Muslims Adam who was the first human. Europeans, who searched this mark carefully, say that there is never a footmark. It appears automatically like a foot mark or it has been created uncleverly by chalk. Because stone cutter can makes such a mark, even if appears as a foot mark, it can’t be proved as a Buddha’s one”.²²

The author of LW is clearly pursuing a strategy to debase the cultural and religious beliefs of native Sri Lankans with the understanding that in so doing, devotees are more vulnerable to accepting alternative sources of wisdom and ultimately converting to a different religion.

²⁰ *ibid*, 297p.

²¹ LW, 45p.

²² *ibid*, 30p.

Meanwhile, the sacred *Śrī Maha Bō Tree* is referenced as a standard bo tree without any associated appellations. The sentence, “*bō gahakaṭa namaskāra karana pinisa dura raṭawalin itā gana haerē wandanākārayō anurādhapurayaṭa yanawāya*” translates to, “many devotees from distance parts of the country go to Anuradhapura in order to worship a standard Bō tree.”²³ In Sinhala, the term “*gaha*” conveys a simple tree meaning such as “*kos gaha*” (jak tree) or “*pol gaha*” (coconut tree). Thus, the author trivializes the sacrality imbued by Buddhists on the *Śrī Maha Bō Tree* by addressing it as if it were any typical tree. In addition to Buddhist religious places, the author also disrespects Hindu religious places in a similar manner,

“...there is a god shrine near the *Parape* River which is devoted to god *Kataragama* that considered god of the war by Hindus. Many people who considering get an opportunity from foolishness, go to the pilgrimage to this shrine from distance part of the country. But many of them face to death suffering fever, because area is unhealthy. It is said that started this shrine in very first time by a Tamil beggar in order to earn money. Some Tamil people go with dancing bulls...Although said *Kataragama* is god of war, there are many Christians in Sri Lanka, who can destroy that god’s statue. Nothing could do for it”.²⁴

Beyond just devotees on pilgrimage to *kataragama*, people who visit *Śrī Maha Bō* are also said to suffer fevers. It may well be the author’s aim to discourage Buddhist practitioners from attending and revering such famous religious places. This notion is supported by the particular question offered for student response in the text, “What is the reason people who go to shrine face to death?”²⁵

Although the author of LW criticizes Buddhist and Hindu religious places, he references an array of different churches without any such negative associations. In fact, according to the accounts of LW, *Kōtte* has become a famous place in Sri Lanka because it is the main focal point of of church missionaries on the island.²⁶ The author also mentions *Baddegama* and *Nallur* as particularly notable locales because of the church missionary activities therein.²⁷

²³ *ibid*, 60p.

²⁴ *ibid*, 51-52pp.

²⁵ *ibid*, 52p.

²⁶ *ibid*, 31p.

²⁷ *ibid*, 36, 57pages.

The ninth edition of LW has a few evident differences from the 1st publication.²⁸ For one, the denigrating stories of the god *Kataragama* have been removed completely, though the alleged threat of fever and cholera to devotees remains a point of emphasis.²⁹ Indeed, the inclusion of ivory in the narrative of the tooth relic, as well as the use of limestone in the story of the Buddha's footmarks, are also retained.³⁰ However, particular respectful terms are actually added in reference to religious places and paradigmatic events. For instance, in this edited discussion of the *Śrī Maha Bō* tree, the author uses the term "*Bō rukakaṭa*" ('to a respectful Bō tree'), marking an apparent departure from the relatively disrespectful usage of "*Bō gahakaṭa*" ('to a simple Bō tree'). Moreover, the original text addresses the Tripitaka writing at Alu-Vihāraya by stating that the inscription was made 400 years after the death of the Buddha (*budungē maraṇaya siddha wī*), using the term *maraṇaya*, a verb commonly used among household (lay) people. In fact, Sri Lankan Buddhists do not use *maraṇaya* in this context, as it does not carry a respectful connotation. The ninth edition, however, refers to the death of the Buddha with the term *aewāmen*³¹ (passing away), which conveys much greater respect for this spiritual paragon. The author clearly attempts to assuage interfaith tensions with these modifications, as they communicate a more respectful posture from the colonial Christian missionaries toward the Buddhist tradition.

Conclusion

In expanding their cultural, economic, and political hegemony in Sri Lanka, colonists undertook a number of different strategies. One central point of leverage was the field of education, wherein colonists worked to illustrate and promote a new culture and religion. Although HR and LW were textbooks used by students, these books constitute a definitive attempt to dislodge Buddhist identities and traditions from the course of Sri Lankan history. The books did this by condemning Buddhist and Hindu sacred places, beliefs, and relics, as well as discouraging people from making pilgrimages to *Daḷadā Māligāwa* (Temple of the Tooth), *Kataragama*, *Śrī pāda*, *Śrī Maha Bōdhi* and *Kelaṇiya*. In this multifarious manner, these books implicitly and sometimes explicitly advanced missionary ideologies that served to undermine interfaith tolerance in colonial Sri Lanka.

²⁸ *Lanka Wistaraya* (1889), Wesleyan Mission Press, Colombo.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 37p.

³⁰ *ibid*, 33, 26pages

³¹ *ibid*, 34p.

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