

Full Text - Prof. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya

Senior Research Fellow, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London and Senior Associate, Lucy Cavendish College, University of Cambridge

Untold Stories: Colonial Period Travellers

Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya

Colonial Period

The achievement of the Portuguese in *Passaram ainda além da Taprobana* “passing [sailing] beyond even the island of Taprobana” is narrated by Luis Camões, the composer of the epic poem, *Os Lusíadas* (The Lusíads). Lusitania was the name by which Portugal was called when it was a Roman province. The 16th century began a new phase where long-distance maritime trade led to encounters leading to colonisation of parts of the Island by the Portuguese and the Dutch and the entire Island by the British. By a historical coincidence, the official presence of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British who washed the shores of Sri Lanka is taken to be about 150 years each. The influences of the three colonisers vary.

Sri Lanka was known as Taprobana by the Greeks. The Portuguese adopted the Arabic name Selendip and called the island Ceilão. The Dutch who followed adopted the word to Ceylan and the British anglicised it to Ceylon. Its cinnamon, renowned to be the best in the world, was the most attractive commodity to the Portuguese who were windswept to Galle by a chance storm, whilst on a voyage to the Maldives, in 1506. Gems, pearls, elephants were some of

the other commodities of interest. Nine caskets gifted by Bhuvanakabahu VII, the king of Kotte, to the King of Portugal, Dom João as a diplomatic gesture celebrating the birth of a son to the King of Portugal and the coronation of an effigy of Dharmapala, grandson of Bhuvanakabahu. Kotte was the most powerful kingdom in the early 16th century and it had suzerainty over the other two kingdoms - Kandy and Jaffnapatam. To the Portuguese, the king of Kotte, which was dominant in trading arrangements, was the king of Ceilão.

Intercultural contact had its effects on several areas of Sri Lankan life, and the political, administrative, legal and sociocultural dynamics are identifiable through linguistic analysis of Sinhala (de Silva Jayasuriya 2008). New ideas were introduced and other ideas changed with inspiration from colonial contact even though the asymmetric power structure was not accepted and the colonial period turned out to be one of turmoil and uncertainty. Sri Lankan language, music, dance, dress, cuisine, names and religion, to name a few areas in which transformation occurred (de Silva Jayasuriya 2001). Dynamics in the rhythmic and melodic structures are evidenced through the popular forms of music, song and dance, *kaffrinha* and *baila* (de Silva Jayasuriya 2013). My publications since 1995 on Portuguese intercultural contact via language (Ceylon Portuguese/Indo-Portuguese of Ceylon/Sri Lanka Portuguese) and other areas of culture have been copied without reference to my publications in recent articles by Mr Earl Barthelot. Anyone researching should delve into the original sources but Mr Barthelot has chosen not to make my references visible.

Areas of cross-cultural contact can be identified through words that have been adopted to the local languages – Sinhala, Tamil and Sri Lanka Malay. The semantic fields indicate the areas of contact: Administration (civil, military, judiciary and financial), Religion, Architecture, Furniture, Cuisine, Music, Dance, Flora and Fauna, for example. Photographs and paintings of *caba kuruttuva*, *saia*, *juvan hatte* are sources that assist researchers in the process of identification. Other areas are more demanding as the transformation was initiated several centuries ago and records are not available. The Dutch who routed the Portuguese after a 20 year battle introduced Roman Dutch law, canals for transportation, food items such as *broedher*, *frikkadel*, *kokis*, for example. And the last coloniser, the British who took over from the Dutch in 1796, introduced the English language, a global language, which superceded “Portuguese” as the international lingua franca.

New Communities

The need for labour to work the colonial enterprise, the necessity to invade and then protect territory, provided the impetus for moving people across the Indian Ocean to Sri Lanka. Thereby the colonial period introduced new communities and broadened the diversity of the Island. The Burghers, Indian Tamils, Sri Lanka Malays and Afro-Sri Lankans are such communities.

Burghers

Sri Lankans who have European ancestry and/or identify with Europeans call themselves Burghers. Dances such as the *Kaffrinha* which was performed by the Sinhalese and Europeans is now the traditional music and dance of the Portuguese

Burghers who live mainly on the east coast of the Island. Their four couple dance is a variation of the Quadrille, a Contradanse which connects Sri Lanka to Europe and Africa (de Silva Jayasuriya 2020).

Sri Lanka Malays

Ancestors of the Sri Lanka Malays were brought by the Dutch from Malaysia and Indonesia. They are called *Ja minissu* (ie people from Java) but as Malay became their language, they became known as Malays (de Silva Jayasuriya 2009).

Their rich culture is expressed in music and dance which they call *Joget*. A tradition of sung poetry called *Pantung*, is almost extinct now (de Silva Jayasuriya 2008). Their foodways such as *dodol*, *sirikaya*, *babath* are delicacies amongst other ethnic groups also.

Indian Tamils

As the British developed a plantation economy, labour needed to be sought. The British moved Indian Tamils, from 1823, initially from Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka to work on coffee plantations initially and later on tea, rubber and cocoa plantations

(Mookiah : 99).

Afro-Sri Lankans

According to their oral history, ancestors of an Afrodescent community were brought to Sri Lanka by the British 200 years ago (1817). Their rhythm-driven music – *manja* (not to be confused with *kaffrinha*) - has become a vehicle for Afro-Sri Lankans to negotiate a space for themselves in the arts scene. The performance connects Sri Lanka to Africa but also through the lyrics to Portugal.

References

De Silva Jayasuriya, Shihan (2000). Portuguese Cultural Imprint on Sri Lanka. *LUSOTOPIE: 253-259*, Journal of the University of Sorbonne, Paris.

De Silva Jayasuriya, Shihan (2001). *Tagus to Taprobane: Portuguese Impact on the socioculture of Sri Lanka from 1505 AD*. The Ceylon Historical Journal Monograph Series Volume 20. Sri Lanka: Tisara Publishers.

De Silva Jayasuriya, Shihan (2008). *The Portuguese in the East: A Cultural History of a Maritime Trading Empire*. London: I B Tauris Academic Publishers.

De Silva Jayasuriya, Shihan (2009). Cross-cultural Influences on the Language of the Sri Lankan Malays. *African & Asian Studies* 8(3): 222-238.

De Silva Jayasuriya, Shihan (2013). Postcolonial Innovations in Sri Lankan Popular Music: Dynamics of Kaffrinha and Baila. *International Journal of the Institute of Ethnic Studies Sri Lanka II*: 1: 1-29.

De Silva Jayasuriya, Shihan (2020). Africa in South Asia: Hybridity in Sri Lankan *Kaffrinha*. *South Asian History and Culture* (2020) 11(4): 390-406.

Mookiah, M S (2017). The Tamil Community of Recent Indian Origins. In: *People of Sri Lanka*. Ministry of National Coexistence and Dialogue. Selacine. pp. 99-