

**UNDERSTANDING THE
SINHALESE**

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PREFACE

Sri Lanka has just concluded one of the gravest crises in her history : the so - called ' ethnic crisis'. I used the word 'so -called' because the label 'ethnic crisis' itself has become a bone of contention. For some, it's merely a 'terrorist problem', which has origins in the struggle for political power.

Whether one calls this crisis an 'ethnic crisis' or not , two facts of importance emerge : first, the fact that there is a crisis, that needs a solution ; and second, the undeniable fact that there is a crucial 'ethnic' element in it.

The terrorist problem that has led to a civil war in the North may be viewed as a problem originating from an ethnic bias, which involves, in the main, the two major ethnic groups in the island : the Sinhalese and the Tamils, who have coexisted in the island for generations.

An ethnic group, of whatever origin or colour, proudly maintains an identity of its own, and wishes to attain its own hopes and aspirations. This invariably creates tensions and issues in multi ethnic cultures such as that of Sri Lanka.

It may not be possible, in the modern world where ideas of free expression and human rights are cherished, to obliterate the identity of ethnic realities, but it may be possible to enlighten members of one ethnic group to appreciate and tolerate the differences of others.

Attempts have already been made by scholars and planners to focus attention to the real nature of 'multi - culturalism', and suggest ways and means of diffusing cultural tension, in multicultural societies.

The aim of the present collection of essays is to present, in brief, the nature of one of the ethnic groups in question : the Sinhalese or the Sinhala. Each essay will deal with one aspect of Sinhalese culture, describing the way the Sinhalese think, speak and act and what makes them do so.

I sincerely believe that it is only through such an understanding, in a detached way, that members of other ethnic groups will be able to

appreciate not only the habits and customs, manner of speech, myths and beliefs, but also the idiosyncrasies of the Sinhalese. It is therefore hoped that these essays will contribute, even in a small measure, to bring about better understanding between the Sinhalese, on the one hand, and Tamils, Muslims and Burghers, on the other.

These essays originally appeared in the daily 'Isand' and I am thankful to its Editorial Board, to Mr. Gamini Weerakoon and Mr. S. Pathiravitana, in particular, for publishing them and permitting me to reprint them in this form.

In writing these essays, special care was taken to present certain aspects of Sinhalese culture, such as that of caste, without hurting the susceptibilities of the different castes. Sinhalese caste, like that of the Tamils, is a very sensitive issue, an issue that is avoided in public but rigorously guarded in private.

This book does not, however, cover all the aspects of Sinhalese society and culture that deserve to be discussed. Some aspects were left out because they have been dealt with in greater detail in some of my other books: 'The Monk and The Peasant', 'Aspect of Sinhalese Folklore and Material Culture: The Sri Lankan Heritage'.

Sketches in this book were done by the well-known Sri Lankan cartoonist, Mr. W. R. Wijesoma. Getting a man of his calibre to draw a few sketches to adorn my book was indeed a dream, but thanks to his generosity and understanding, he made that dream come true by providing me sketches to adorn the eight sections of this book.

I owe my thanks to several good men and women who contributed their share in bringing out this publication: Mr. Gamini Sumanasekara for persuading Mr. Wijesoma to do the sketches, Miss. Chandani Sanjeevani for typesetting it, and Tharanjee Prints for printing it.

I also found the informal comments made by my wife, Kusum, my son, Samithajiva, and my daughter, Madhubashini, very thought-provoking and useful. They certainly helped to improve the quality of this book. Shortcomings, if any, are my own.

J.B.

Of
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Origins



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Decoding Sinhala Culture

Prof. Stanley J. Tambiah, a Sri Lankan professor of anthropology at Harvard, stirred up a hornet's nest recently by writing a book on religion, politics and violence in Sri Lanka titled 'Buddhism Betrayed?'. The basic question he raises in this book is 'if Buddhism preaches non-violence why is there so much political violence in Sri Lanka today?'

Of course, he admits that similar questions can be raised in relation to the practice of other religions too. If Christianity preaches brotherly love, why are the Catholics and Protestants killing each other in Northern Ireland? If Hinduism and Islam are preaching universal love, why are the Hindus and Muslims fighting over a piece of land in Ayodhya? Who are killing one another in old Yugoslavia?

The simple answer is that there has always been and is a difference between precept and practice. The practice of a religion is coloured by various other factors, social as well as political. Over the centuries people have transformed religions of their founders into various other movements.

For the impasse between the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils, and the political violence that erupts from time to time Prof. Tambiah himself provides a convincing answer in his earlier book, published in 1986 titled 'Sri Lanka: Ethnic Fratricide and the Dismantling of Democracy.'. In his chapter on 'Two Social Profiles' he calls the Sinhalese 'A Majority with a Minority Complex' and the Sri Lankan Tamils 'A Minority with a Parity Claim'. No wonder that the two people are at logger heads.

Prof. Tambiah thinks that the Sinhalese are racist. Are they really racist? Let the question be answered by another Sri Lankan Tamil, Mr. Lakshman Kadirgamar, the late Minister of

Foreign Affairs. In his address at the 49th session of United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 26, 1994 he said categorically that the Sinhalese are not racist at all.

'In my first speech one month ago, in our newly elected Parliament, I as a representative of the minority Tamil community said and I shall repeat it here in this supreme parliament of the peoples of the world: Let it never be said if it could ever been said that the Sinhala people are racists. They are not. They are absolutely not and I think this election has demonstrated that so handsomely that particular argument can be laid to rest for ever. (Daily News, 29 th Sept. 1994)

Why is there a difference of opinion between Prof. Tambiah and Minister Kadirgamar? Perhaps because the former lived at Boston, Harvard with a few other expatriates and the latter lives in Colombo, among the Sinhalese. The one who lives among the Sinhalese knows exactly what happens when ethnic flames rise. Who provides the Tamils protection but the so-called racist Sinhalese?

The truth of the matter is that there are a few Sinhalese who are racist but the majority are not. Even those few who are racist are not always so. To know the Sinhalese you have to live with them. So it takes a while. People are culture specific. To understand the Sinhalese and their ways you have to know the culture in which they have been brought up. These chapters are intended to help non-Sinhala readers to decode Sinhala culture so that they could understand the contradictions, paradoxes, and other strange ways of behaviour of the Sinhalese.

Culture communicates, through a silent language. For instance, the Sinhalese go by their own sense of Time. It is true that almost everyone nowadays wears a wristwatch, some of the most modern designs available in the market, for that matter, but punctuality has little to do with it. For they go by the '*Sinhala velāva*' - Sinhala time which is usually a few hours behind

Besides the parents, the other most important relative in the Sinhalese family is '*mämä*' (uncle), that is one's mother's brother. One of the most important roles he has to play is to lead the bride or bride groom to the '*pöruva*' at the auspicious time. In the traditional village, where cross cousin marriage was the order of the day, he was the father-in-law to be. He was also the most trusted relative of one's parents. The Sinhala proverbs substantiate this belief.

tanē ætnan mämät amma'

(Mämä is the mother but for the absence of breasts)

Mämagē mäpata æñgillata kiri erenava'

(Milk comes even to mämä's (uncle's) thumb)

According to Sinhalese belief, the purity of one's family goes down seven generations, and these seven generations are known as '*hat mutu paramparäva*'. The members of these seven generations are the following.

1. ätta
2. n utta
3. kitta
4. kiri kitta
5. natta
6. panatta
7. kirikæmutta

Some of the terms vary from region to region.

It is also the custom among the Sinhalese to use kinship terms to denote people who have absolutely no relationship with one. The terms, '*amma*' (mother) and '*nænda*' (aunt) are used by young ones for elderly ladies, and the term '*mämä*' (uncle) for elderly men. The terms for siblings are in use among school children - both male and female - to address one another. For very old men, the term '*siya*' (grand- father) is used, and for old women, the term '*ächchi*' (grand-mother) is used. The only kinship term that is not used for others is the term for the father, '*tätta*' or '*appachchi*' perhaps for the simple reason that there ought to be no ambiguity about one's father!.

*Of
Their
Crossings
In life*

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W. S. Wisesova

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A Child is Born

On the day I was born", writes Martin Wickramasinghe, in his autobiography *'Upandā Sita'* "my father, sisters and cousins were elated with joy when they heard the mid-wife say *'sarama'* (sarong) because I was the only sarong that my mother gave birth to, after eight *'kambās.'* The Sinhala words *'sarama'* (sarong) and *'kambāya'* denote two articles of cloth, meant to cover the lower half of a person, the former for men and the latter for women. In the folk speech of the Sinhala village, however, they have acquired symbolic meanings: *'sarama'* referring to a male and the *'kambāya'* referring to a female.

In the traditional village, the male child enjoys a position that is not enjoyed by his sisters, because of his link with the paternal line. He is needed to continue the father's name (*paramparāve name geniyanda*).

The birth of a child into a Sinhala family still causes great concern and anxiety. The pregnant mother becomes the center of family activity. Elders begin to shower advice on her, on the many 'dos' and 'dents' of cultural behaviour.

A generation or two ago, mothers gave birth to their children, not in hospitals and maternity homes, but within the confines of their own homes, however small they were. The room which the pregnant mother occupied during child-birth was called *'timbiri gē*, and the mid-wife, whom the Sinhalese affectionately called *'vinnambu amma'* was always there at the hour of need. The Sinhalese word *'amma'* denotes 'mother', and it is a term that is affixed to many words that denote people who come into the life of the Sinhalese in important ways. It

was the mid-wife who announced to the world the arrival of the 'sarong' or 'kambäya'.

A woman who can give birth to children is considered 'fertile' 'fortunate' and 'blessed'. To have or not to have offsprings is something determined by the will of the gods or by one's own 'karma', that is, one's thoughts and actions in this and previous lives. One's horoscope tells one whether one will be blessed with children or not and if it predicts no children, elders will advise one to resort to folkways that restore fertility.

Certain Buddhist temples, such as the 'Daladä Mäligäva', the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Kandy, shrines of Gods such as those at Kataragama and Alutnuvara, and the Sacred Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura are among those sacred places visited by the Sinhalese to make vows (*bära veneva*) to beget children. If the vow is answered, they go back to the temple or shrine with a sapling of a coconut to fulfil the vow (*bära oppu karäna*).

Some pregnant mothers express an unusual desire to eat certain foods and then they are said to suffer from 'dola duka', literally, a suffering that pregnant mothers undergo for two hearts: that of the baby in the womb and that of the mother herself. Elders will do whatever possible to appease this desire, for the fear lurks in the minds that if such *dola duka* is not properly appeased, the new born baby will pay for it in one way or another.

On the other hand, the pregnant mother will be advised to avoid certain kinds of food that might be harmful to both the mother and the baby.

Food is, however, not the only thing to be avoided during pregnancy. Preparation of clothing for the new comer is another task that must be handled with care. In some Sinhala families, the pregnant mother is not allowed to sew any of the articles of clothing for the baby. Even when others do it on behalf