

Whose History: Exploring the Elusiveness of a ‘Sri Lankan’ Past and Present in History Textbooks

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Abstract

Textbooks are a powerful tool in the socialisation process, shaping national values and attitudes of the younger generation. History in particular is a subject that provides an official account which ‘tells us how we got to be who we are’ (Cole 2013: 11). In Sri Lanka history is highly contested and this analysis of a set of recent history textbooks demonstrates that despite ambitious reforms since the 1990s they do not foster social cohesion and multiculturalism as envisioned by policy makers. Instead, their language and story-lines perpetuate Sinhalese-centric historical narratives that present disputed myths, symbols and heroes as official history. This paper discusses first how these narratives legitimize Sinhalese claims for sovereignty in a unitary state by constructing an exclusive, Sinhalese-centric version of nationhood and emphasizing the role of Buddhism. Second, we look at the marginalization of minority communities through their representation, or better lack thereof, in the textbooks. Finally, the paper highlights how the historical narratives of the textbooks provide frames within which the end of the war can be constructed as a continuation of a Sinhalese-centric history. Overall, this paper uses history textbooks to provide an inside into the myths and symbols of contemporary Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and how these may be used to make sense of post-war realities.

Keywords: Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, textbooks analysis, ethno-symbolism, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a textbook analysis of six Sri Lankan history textbooks published between 2007 and 2009.¹ It argues that these textbooks do not present an inclusive, Sri Lankan version of history, but rather perpetuate Sinhalese-centric narratives that present disputed myths, symbols and heroes as official history. Following a brief introduction to the role of textbooks in Sri Lanka, the paper will proceed in three parts. First, it examines the legitimization of Sinhalese sovereignty within a unitary state, focusing on the exclusive mytho-history, and particularly the priority of Buddhism within it, constructed by the history textbooks. Second, it discusses the limited representation of minority communities, in particular highlighting the potential negative stereotyping of the Tamil community within the presented official historical narratives. Finally, the paper briefly outlines how the textbooks’ historical narratives may provide frames within which the post-war present can be constructed as a continuation of a Sinhalese-centric history.

Background

Textbooks are an important part of the socializing process, reflecting the culture of which they are a part, providing knowledge, cultivating attitudes and transmitting values (Xochellis et al. 2001a: 11). History, in particular, is a subject that ‘tells us how we got to be who we are’ (Cole 2013: 206) and is often employed by countries ‘to form the national consciousness and national identity of the younger generation’ (Xochellis et al. 2001b: 44). The analyzed history textbooks serve as ideological apparatuses in the education and mobilization of future Sri Lankan citizens (Perera 2009: 5), a purpose clearly understood by the editors of the textbooks as the introductory message of the Grade 8 textbook highlights: ‘This is a gift to you from the Democratic

Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, produced specially for you so that you may be a worthy citizen of the country' (*History Grade 8* 2008: v).

In Sri Lanka the state has long held a monopoly over the production and distribution of textbooks, making them even more susceptible to exploitation or ideological purposes (Ibid.) as means of ideological orientation and control by elites (Janmaat 2007: 308;). Since 1980 the government distributes a standard textbook for each subject from grades one to thirteen to all schools for free with little competition from private publishers. These standard textbooks have long been a controversial issue between the communities, as there is 'a kind of obsession with history' in Sri Lanka (Wickramasinghe 2013: 94). In the 1990s reports pointed out a number of problems: schoolbooks were slow to incorporate curriculum changes, contained many grammatical and spelling errors, mono-ethnic and mono-religious bias, factual and contextual errors (Wickrema and Colenso 2003; Perera et al. 2004).

From 1997 onwards educational reforms were enacted to address these issues and further the goal of national cohesion (Perera et al. 2004). As a result, a new curriculum and a textbook evaluation system were introduced with the goal of improving the content and production process of textbooks in 2007. A major objective of these changes was to utilize education to increase social cohesion and it was stipulated that curricular content in particular be free from any bias against ethnicity or religion, and included balanced representations of different cultural heritages present in Sri Lanka. The overall aim of the policies and reforms enacted since the late 1990s was summarized as follows:

Nation building and the establishment of a Sri Lankan identity through the promotion of national cohesion, national integrity, national unity, harmony and peace, and recognizing cultural diversity in Sri Lanka's plural society within a concept of respect for human dignity. (Ministry of Education 2008)

It is against the background of these ambitious goals and reforms that the textbooks were analyzed, using a story-line analysis to investigate whose story is told, which group is active and resolving problems, how other groups appear, the extent to which these groups cause problems, and who the reader should sympathize with or learn most about, in order to

examine the discursive formation of Sinhalese nationalism throughout the history textbooks.

Discussion

Locating the Nation

Nationalism derives its power from the myths, memories, traditions and symbols of ethnic heritages of the nation unifying it internally while differentiating it from other groups (Smith 1999: 9 – 14). In the case of Sri Lanka, Kapferer (2012: 33) has demonstrated how certain myths and legends from the *Mahāvamsa* have been transformed from folk knowledge into widely accepted 'truths' and historical facts available for manipulation by nationalist ideologies. The portrayal of the Vijayan myth in the textbooks is an example of how they build on disputed Sinhalese sources to construct what Tambiah calls a 'mythohistory' (1986: 70). They present a selective and ethno-centric version of the past perpetuating the dominance of the Sinhalese as a unique people of special worth, an ancient 'chosen people' (Manogaran 1987; Sitrapalam 2009). Although Sinhalese Buddhist identity and culture have only become coherent and systematic phenomena in the past century (Kapferer, 2012), the historical narrative of the analyzed textbooks constructs the Sinhalese nation as a fixed entity existing since the beginnings of history in Sri Lanka.

The storylines portray a modern nation that can be traced back to ancient times, which helps to establish it as a natural and timeless entity. Importantly, it is a distinctively Sinhalese nation whose memory is presented. The textbooks include direct time references to indicate a long history of Sri Lanka as a unitary country under Sinhalese rule, for instance the ancient Anuradhapura Kingdom 'remained the capital city of Sri Lanka for a long period of about 1400 years' (*History Grade 7* 2007: 59) and Sri Lanka is claimed to have existed 'as an independent land [. . .] with a history of more than two thousand years' (*History 9* 2009: 16) before the British took over the whole island in 1815. Phrases such as 'according to tradition' (*History Grade 7* 2007: 88), 'from the ancient days' (*History Grade 8* 2008: 22) or 'traditional society' (*History 9* 2009: 58) are spread throughout the history textbooks to characterise the nation and its culture. It is within this framework that the reader learns about simultaneously existing kingdoms in Kotte, Kandy and Jaffna in the early sixteenth century. They are

described as ‘administrative centres’ (*History Grade 8 2008: 57*) implying that they are part of a bigger unit and indeed the ruler of the Kingdom of Kotte ‘was recognized as the supreme ruler of Sri Lanka’ (Id.: 58). Therefore, even after the downfall of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, the sense of the island as a whole remains, despite several divisions. The textbooks do not engage with the geographical, political and societal fragmentations in the country’s past and what those meant for ‘the nation’. Instead, they are presented within the continuous Sinhalese Buddhist national memory.

The depiction of the arrival of Prince Vijaya, one of the most influential myths of Sinhalese nationalism, even supports claims that the history of the country began with the arrival of the Sinhalese. The Vijayan myth originates from the *Mahāvamsa* and presents the Sinhalese nation with an exclusive myth of origin that sets it above its surroundings and establishes its mission (Smith 1999: 15f.). The question of who was first on the island of Sri Lanka is one of the most controversial issues surrounding the history of the country and has important political implications. The Grade 10 history textbook offers a clear answer to the question: The Aryans, meaning the Sinhalese, were the first to arrive in Sri Lanka around the fifth and sixth centuries BC (2007: 27). It explicitly supports the widespread nationalistic view that there was no civilization in Sri Lanka until the Sinhalese arrived (Soysa 2009: 3): ‘The history of Sri Lanka begins after the arrival of Prince Vijaya with 700 followers. They were the first Aryans to come to Sri Lanka’ (*History Grade 10 2007: 26*). The textbook briefly explains how Vijaya overpowered the original Yakka tribe and established Aryan settlements (Ibid.) before other communities arrived, often as aggressive invaders:

The Aryans were the first to arrive in Sri Lanka to establish their settlements. [. . .] In later years Sri Lanka experienced a number of South Indian invasions. These invasions resulted in many Indian races settling in the country increasing its population. (*History Grade 10 2007: 50*)

The Vijayan myth is established as the undisputable starting point of history not only for the Sinhalese but Sri Lanka as a country, a single political unit, perpetuating nationalists’ claims that the Sinhalese are the original people of the island (Manogaran 1987: 2).

The hegemony of the Sinhalese Buddhists throughout the textbooks is further perpetuated by the depiction of Buddhism as a core element of national identity and its link to the state perpetuating an ethnocentric and even chauvinist conception of the nation. Tambiah argues that the form of Buddhism often drawn on by Sinhalese nationalists has been ‘shorn of its universalistic ethical message’ (1986: 60), yet the textbooks frequently establish Buddhism as the source of what are desirable characteristics of individuals, of what is ethically good and morally defensible. It is constructed as a source of the core ideas and values of the Sinhalese nation, separating it from and lifting it above all non-Buddhists. The role of Buddhism and the *Mahāvamsa* is comparable to Christianity and the Bible in Europe that have provided a source for nations’ claims ‘to be a chosen people, a holy nation, with some special divine mission to fulfil’ (Hastings 1997: 196). Throughout the textbooks Buddhism is subtly established as a superior religion, exemplified by the following tree metaphor comparing Buddhist and non-Buddhist rulers:

Like attempting to plant poisonous trees in a place where there had been wish conferring trees earlier, (kap ruk) non Buddhists should not be placed in power in Sri Lanka to which the Kalinga dynasty was the rightful heir (Galpotha stone inscription of king Nissankamalla). (*History Grade 2007: 93*)

This depiction of Buddhist rulers as ‘wish conferring trees’ as opposed to ‘poisonous trees’ representing non-Buddhist rulers constructs a striking image of the Sinhalese as superior, implying that their rule is good for Sri Lanka, while the rule of others is poisonous and detrimental to the country. Similarly, biographies of ancient kings often praise great kings for their service to Buddhism, while anti-Buddhist politics or disrespect for Bhikkhus, the Buddhist monks, has disastrous consequences for others. Such depictions implicitly support a narrative which highlights Buddhism as superior and a measure of just rule based on the principles laid down by the Buddha (*History Grade 10 2007: 40*).

The historical link between Buddhism and the Sri Lankan state as constructed by the narratives of the textbooks is important as it not only reiterates the superiority of the Sinhalese nation but also legitimizes them as the only rightful rulers of Sri

Lanka. This is also evident in the depiction of the Tooth Relic, ascribed a special role as a central symbol of Sinhalese nationalism appearing repeatedly throughout the storylines within the Grade 7–10 textbooks. This Buddhist symbol is constructed as the prerequisite of rightful sovereignty of the country, establishing an intrinsic link between Buddhism and legitimate political power. It implies the assertion that the only acceptable political arrangements of government depend on Buddhist leadership, constructing Sinhalese Buddhist sovereignty as an institutionalized religious right justified by the superiority of the Sinhalese Buddhists which in turn it helps to perpetuate within an exclusive construction of nationhood.

The Representation of ‘Others’

The Sinhalese-centric bias of the textbooks’ historical narrative is further perpetuated by the negative portrayals of minority communities, particularly the Tamils, where they are represented at all. Negative portrayals of the ethnic ‘other’, especially in situations of ethnic conflict, are common in textbooks as such negative stereotyping may help to construct national identity and internal cohesion (Janmaat 2007). The Sri Lankan history textbooks provide several ‘others’ throughout, with South Indians and European colonizers representing primary threats to the nation. Internal ‘others’ are more difficult to identify. Traditionally, nationalist narratives have pitted Tamils against the Sinhalese, but it needs to be noted on the outset that although the textbooks were written against the background of over two decades of civil war, they contain very little explicit negative ethnic stereotyping. This may be the consequence of more stringent control mechanisms for the avoidance of bias in textbooks introduced in recent years and may be mainly an effect of the exclusion of material. The textbooks do not cover any of the most recent history of the country, glossing over the civil war and its actors entirely. Their story-lines do not include a coherent history of Sri Lankan minorities, their stories, culture and religion, as well as their relationship to the Sinhalese majority, thus they provide only limited material for the analysis of explicit portrayals of Tamils.

Throughout the textbooks, it becomes evident that minority communities have a place in the history of the country that is separate from that of the majority. They are not part of the Sinhalese-centric historical narrative and usually appear as foreigners,

outsiders, or even invaders. The Grade 7 and 10 textbooks in particular highlight the arrival of the Tamils and Muslims well after Sinhalese had established settlements on the island, clearly distinguishing them from the Sinhalese ‘natives’ and at times explicitly depicting them as ‘unwelcome external influences’ (*History Grade 10*: 57). Non-Sinhalese remain different and are largely unrecognized as part of the nation or the history of the country by the textbooks, supporting contemporary claims that Tamils are strangers, not fellow citizens (Vanniasingham 1988: 119).

Furthermore, negative stories about South Indians and Tamils reiterate their foreignness and establish them as threats to the ‘natives’. One of two explicit examples of how Tamils are linked to treacherous and violent behaviour can be found in the Grade 7 textbook. It presents Tamils as unreliable and with shifting loyalties, speaking of ‘[t]he assistance given to the South Indian invaders against the Sinhala kings, by the Tamil soldiers who had settled down in Sri Lanka when they were got down by Sinhala kings to establish their authority’ (*History Grade 7 2007*: 59). The account implies that while the Tamils to which it refers were originally brought to Sri Lanka by Sinhalese rulers to support them, they later betrayed the Sinhalese and supported the Indian invaders. Such explicit negative portrayals of Tamils are rare, but their effect is reinforced by depictions of South Indians as cruel and harmful to Sri Lanka and her people.

One outstanding example is the presentation of Magha of Kalinga, an Indian invader who is depicted as especially cruel:

Magha blinded king Parakrama Pandya. He plundered the wealth of the leading persons of the country and distributed that wealth among his soldiers. He also demolished Chaityas, Temples and Pirivenas and burnt their books and valuables. He set fire to homes and farms of the ordinary people and also destroyed tanks and anicuts. ... His invasion destroyed human resources including the leaders, ordinary people and the Bhikkhus as well as physical resources such as Chaityas, temples, tanks, anicuts and books. (*History Grade 8 2007*: 99f.)

This account of Magha’s invasion of Sri Lanka in 1215 is an illustration of extreme violence and cruelty. The textbook describes the invasion as a

display of ‘the nature of a terrible war’ (Id.: 99) and vividly depicts its disastrous consequences for the Sinhalese. The story of Magha’s destructive rule, a ‘convenient anti-south Indian trope that the *Cūlavamsa* often repeats’ (de Silva Wijeyeratne 2014: 21), is another example of how the textbooks present events from the *vamsa* literature as historical fact.

In other examples the textbooks use adjectives such as ‘cruel’ or ‘brutal’ as well as implicit negative depictions to describe the Tamils in several of the rare instances in which they feature at all. Such radical depictions, however, are exceptional. Most of the time negative images are much more subtle, for example, the portrayal of King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, the last ruler of an independent Sinhalese kingdom before British colonial rule. He was a member of the Nayakkar dynasty from South India, a Hindu (*History Grade 8* 2008: 9) and Tamil, who turned from ‘a calm and quiet person’ into ‘a brutal ruler’ due to his alcohol addiction (*History 9* 2009: 15) and is subsequently to blame for the loss of the nation’s independence.

We need to take care not to over-interpret such comparatively sporadic depictions of individuals or border conflicts, which were not uncommon in the past. Yet it is not these representations in themselves that are noteworthy, but the manner in which they are placed throughout the textbooks as part of a Sinhalese-centric historical narrative, providing a one-sided image to the reader. The history textbooks perpetuate primordial views of antagonistic community relations in the past, potentially having adverse effects on community relations in the present. The superiority of the Sinhalese over non-Buddhists is reinforced through the limited representations of minority communities, strengthening the internal cohesion of ‘us’, the Sinhalese nation, in the light of internal and external threats. The inherent link between South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamils serves as a reminder of the overall majority of Tamils in the geographical area. It buttresses the siege mentality of the Sinhalese that observers have termed the minority complex of a majority (Tambiah 1986: 92). It is particularly the small size of the island and its proximity to India that are at the heart of this. The idea that the Sinhalese nation is surrounded by ‘others’ who, as legends, the chronicles and the stories of the history textbooks constantly remind the nation, have in the past posed a menace to the Sinhalese and its

great civilisations (Manogaran 1987: 2) is a prominent theme of contemporary Sinhalese nationalism. The reinterpretations of the relationship between Sri Lanka and South India within traditional chronicles substantiates fear from the big neighbour (Tambiah 1986: 93), a trend also visible in the textbooks and furthermore augmented by representations of European colonial powers.

The Present as History

The end of the war in 2009 provided an unprecedented opportunity for the Rajapaksa government to consolidate its power in a unitary state, yet it also posed challenges to Sinhalese nationalist ideology that had come to increasingly rely on anti-LTTE tropes. While more hopeful observers were speaking of a ‘golden opportunity’ for the country (Lunn et al. 2009) or perhaps the beginning of a ‘new patriotism’ (Wickramasinghe 2009), it soon became evident that the defeat of the Tamil Tigers ushered into a ‘victor’s peace’ characterized by public triumphalism, increased nepotism and corruption, heavy militarization of the north, and a glaring lack of political reform, accountability and justice (e.g. Hyndman 2015; DeVotta 2014; Höglund and Orjuela 2011). Instead of providing a shared historic momentum for a united Sri Lankan nation that ‘has removed the word “minorities” from [its] vocabulary’ (Rajapaksa 2009a), the end of the war brought the rejuvenation of an exclusive Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.

History is not only about the ancient past that provides the historical narratives for the nation, but also about remembering and forgetting the present as part of the making history. Myths and symbols are resources that may be utilized to unite or mobilize the nation, to legitimize policies or in the case of post-war Sri Lanka rather their absence. At the same time the past also provides frames of reference to understand the present which may in turn perpetuate nationalist narratives. The end of the war in 2009 was a decisive historical event for the country and its people that has been and will continue to be interpreted and reinterpreted by different actors for different purposes for a long time to come. While for many Tamils the end of the war presents a ‘peace of the vanquished’ (Uyangoda 2012: 24), Sinhalese nationalists have framed the victory as a continuation of Sinhalese-centric mytho-historical narratives (Gaul 2017a). The official version of the civil war and its end establishes a national narrative that seeks ‘to consolidate memory

into a “usable past” in the service of nation building’ (Nesiah 2005, cited in Seoighe 2016: 359), yet it is not an inclusive Sri Lankan nation that is constructed, but rather an exclusive, ethno-centric one. Exploring post-war nationalism within presidential rhetoric, we can observe the perpetuation of a selective national memory whereby the end of the war is framed as a continuation of the historical narratives also evident in the textbooks after 2009.

Shortly after the defeat of the LTTE and the death of its leader, Velupillai Prabhakaran, then-president Mahinda Rajapaksa declared ‘a victory for all who live in the country’ (Rajapaksa 2009b), providing a potentially inclusive narrative for all who love the country and stand against terrorism irrespective of religion or ethnicity. Yet, his governments rhetoric and triumphalism largely glossed over the true extent of the military operations and their consequences, as well as the continued militarization of the north. Furthermore, his ‘narration of wholeness and unity through a collective victimization’ (Schubert 2013: 13) does not include all communities as equals, but rather purposefully constructs Tamils as a special category of victims differentiated both from the LTTE and the collective nation of Sri Lanka (Id.: 14). While the textbooks included implicit negative stereotyping of the minority communities that presented them as strangers, as not fully nationals, the victimization of Tamils similarly subtly distinguishes them from the Sinhalese, while allowing their inclusion into the nation. It should be noted that the official version of the ‘victor’s peace’ constructs a distinctively different victimization experienced and expressed by the Tamil community itself. While the former emphasizes the brutality of the authoritarian rule of the LTTE, the latter highlights Tamil experiences in the repressive and discriminating Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan state (Seoighe 2016). These diverging narratives shape the post-war context, different political demands and the framework for reconciliation, justice and accountability - it is the victorious Sinhalese who determine the terms and conditions for any potential settlement with the Tamil community (Uyangoda 2012: 24).

Another major obstacle to the end of the war as an inclusive momentum for all communities in Sri Lanka is the historicity of the victory as it is embedded within the continuity of the Sinhalese nation’s history. The end of the war reaffirmed the

unitary character of the state as the militant separatist threat was defeated, allowing the intensification of the ‘Signalization’ of physical and discursive spaces. It is not utilized as a fresh starting point for a shared history, but rather signifies a momentum for ethnic revivalism. It is framed within existing Sinhalese Buddhist myths and legends becoming itself a symbolic resource for Sinhalese nationalism, buttressed by triumphalism and Rajapaksa’s performances as a new Dutugemunu. By framing the government’s victory over the LTTE as an extension of the Sinhalese nation’s history and likening it to the battles of the past it shares the same ontological ground as Dutugemunu’s mythical defeat over Elara within Rajapaksa’s post-war Sinhalese Buddhist imaginary. This not only perpetuates ideas of an ancient antagonism between Sinhalese and Tamils, but also poses an obstacle to present day reconciliation.

Conclusion

The immediate post-war period saw the consolidation of Sinhalese rule and shifts towards soft-authoritarianism under Rajapaksa (Uyangoda 2011; DeVotta 2014) enabled by widely dispersed historical narratives as frames of references that naturalize a ‘Sinhalese Buddhist’ rather than a truly ‘Sri Lankan’ nation. While the government has since changed, the election of Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe has hardly heralded the end of Sinhalese nationalism. The challenges posed by the deep entrenchment of Sinhalese nationalism within politics and far beyond remain, as is evident by the opposition to and struggles within the current government that promised far reaching reforms but so far failed to deliver.

History, in education and beyond, remains a site of contestation between and within communities. A site currently dominated by the Sinhalese, buttressed by the 2009 victory, and their exclusive, ethno-centric narratives that largely marginalize minority communities. The analysed history textbooks provide a striking example of how traditional or folk knowledge, specifically the *Mahāvamsa* tradition, is perpetuated as common and even official knowledge at the expense of a critical engagement with alternative readings of history:

History, the basis of many nation’s strength, has been our bane. Myths, legends, truths and untruths have been freely mixed and what has flourished least, expectedly, has been the truth.

(Suriyakumaran 1984, cited in Kapferer 2012: 34).

A 'true' history, whether of the ancient or more recent past, of course will remain elusive. Yet, it is the search for a more inclusive, multi-ethnic version of history that may be shared by all communities that urgently needs to begin.

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