PROBLEMATIC VISIONS OF THE VILLAGE IN SRI LANKA: A PRELIMINARY REVIEW[1]

I. The Problem: India-centrism

This brief essay has its roots in a few simple questions: Has Sri Lanka's geographic location affected how social scientists—particularly foreign anthropologists—have approached research there? Is it possible that because the island is so close to India, we have tended to see Sri Lankan society and culture with a Indianist bias? And also, does it matter?

Before I begin, I want to offer two disclaimers about my scope. The first is that here, in this preliminary exploration, I have limited myself to reviewing studies of Sinhalese Sri Lankans (and only a non-random selection of such studies, at that). Given more apparent similarities of language and religion between Tamils in Sri Lanka and Tamils in India, I would anticipate that the scholarly problematics, or sorts of questions asked and assumptions made about similarity and difference, are probably not the same in studies of people who identify themselves or are identified by others as "Sinhalese" and those labeled "Tamil." Focusing on the Sinhalese is a simplifying choice, and one that also allows me to stay with the scholarly literature I know best. My other disclaimer is that I am not concerned with the more familiar issue of the relevance of Indology for understanding contemporary South Asia; that is another question altogether (see, for example, Tambiah 1987). My focus here is much narrower: has Sri Lanka's physical nearness to India affected how we have gone about our investigations into Sinhalese culture and society?

The simplest—but, as I will explain, incomplete—answer to my question is *yes*, at times there has indeed been a tendency for anthropologists (and others) writing about rural Sinhalese society to assume a Hindu-like—even a Hindu-derived—culture, appearances notwithstanding. This has perhaps been most obvious in two mainstays of the anthropological literature on South Asia, gender and caste.[2]

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[1] This essay was prepared originally for a session entitled, "Re-theorizing Nationalism, Religion, Citizenship, and Postcolonial Subjectivity: Critical perspectives on Knowledge Formation from the 'Other' South Asian States," at the 2002 meetings of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans, Louisiana. I thank the organizers of the panel, Laura Leve and Lamia Karim, for their invitation to participate. I also thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for a particularly helpful review.

[2] I emphasize that in this brief and exploratory essay, I am considering almost entirely

Women in Sri Lanka sometimes have been assumed to have a social status secondary to that of men, because of a presumed "common Indic culture" (e.g., Grossholtz 1984), and caste has been portrayed as if it were like Indian caste somehow even though it also is recognized that observed caste behaviour is quite different (McGilvray 1982).

For example, when our informants tell us that women are more vulnerable to demonic possession or must be more circumspect in public behavior, we (or at least, some of us, including myself) have tended to see it as confirming what we already "know" about women in South Asia. A few years ago I had the opportunity to compare the situation of female potters in Poona (Maharashtra State, western India) with female potters in the Kurunegala District in Sri Lanka. In both groups, people made ideological statements about women that suggest that they see women as less able, more vulnerable, and in need of male care and protection. But in practice, actual gender discrimination was far more invidious among the Hindu potters than among the Sri Lankan ones (Winslow 1994). Sri Lankan women used the potter's wheel, had few if any menstrual pollution restrictions, and often managed household finances and contributed equally with their husbands to important household decisions. None of this was true for the Poona women.[3] Other anthropologists who have conducted intensive fieldwork in rural areas of Sri Lanka also have heard ideological statements alleging female inferiority and observed, sometimes with surprise, practices of female autonomy and independence (e.g., Alexander 1995, Gamburd 2000, Stirrat 1988). We do not argue that women are never victimized by physical, economic, and ideological power inequalities; and some of us do find on balance that the situation ultimately discriminates against women (e.g., Kapferer 1983:92-110, Risseeuw 1991). But I think that the evidence shows that the apparent disadvantages of Sinhalese women pale in comparison with those of many women in India and that it is important not to approach gender status

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American and British anthropologists. In her interesting and very useful review of anthropology *from* Sri Lanka, Nissan noted that Sri Lankan anthropologists have been much less interested in contemporary caste and caste systems than foreign scholars have been, and she does not mention any studies at all of gender by Sri Lankan anthropologists (Nissan 1987, esp. p. 5).

[3] I must confess, however, that I did not know the Poona potter families nearly as well as I know the Sri Lankan ones; I spent only five months in Poona, while I have made repeated visits to the Kurunegala District potters over the last thirty years. Therefore, something potentially as subtle as influencing household decisions may easily have escaped my attention. However, I am certain about using the wheel and the menstrual restrictions, as well as the Hindu potter women's general rhetoric and demeanor of submissiveness (see Winslow 1994 for a more detailed comparison of women in the two situations).

in Sri Lanka as simply part of a generalized South Asian phenomenon.[4]

But my concern here is not with gender or caste but, instead, with that traditional subject and location of anthropological research: the village. I think our views of the village have been more complicated than our views of either gender or caste because we have brought to the study of the Sinhalese village not only our understanding of India but also our reading of the literature on villages in other areas of the world. I suggest that the net result is that we have, at times, misconstrued the Sinhalese village; that the word village should probably be dropped and for at least some parts of the island, something like "lived locality"—or, if it were not so ridiculously awkward, "rural-places-where-people-and-their-kin-live-and-work"—substituted instead; and that if we did this, some of what we now perceive as the effects of recent cultural and economic change (sometimes referred to by the shorthand term, "globalization") might be seen as part and parcel of the way Sinhalese villages always have been. But should we care? Are not villages on their way out both as the location of people's lives and as the focus of anthropological study? I am not convinced of the truth of either of those assumptions, but if I were, I would still argue that even if what we really want to understand is the play of global forces in local places, we need to know what the lay of the land was before those global forces got there. Globalization is not, to borrow a metaphor I heard in a public lecture by Saskia Sassen, an oil slick that covers all; it is instead shaped always by what was already there. After a description of my own problems applying the term village, I will briefly sketch my argument.

II. Village Visions in Sri Lanka

When I first saw Walangama,[5] the Sri Lankan potter village in which I have done fieldwork intermittently over the past thirty years, I could hardly imagine a village that looked less like one. A dozen or so small houses, some of mud and

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[4] Women's status in India also varies significantly across social groups (for more discussion of this point and some examples from the literature on India, please see Winslow 1994).

[5] "Walangama" (Pottery Village) is a pseudonym for a community of approximately 625 potters located in the southern Kurunegala District. Walangama lies about 25 miles inland from Chilaw, in the intermediate climate zone between the two-monsoon-a-year wet zone and the one-monsoon-a-year dry zone. I have done research in Walangama for a total of just over three years in long and short stays spread out over about 25 years: 1974-76, 1989, 1992, 1993, 1997, 1999, 2001, and 2003. My research has been supported by the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Health, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the University of New Hampshire. My findings are described in a series of articles, most recently Winslow 2003.

thatch, others of plastered bricks and tile, meandered along a narrow strip of uneven asphalt through seemingly endless coconut palms. My expectations had been formed, I think, by my American graduate education in the 1960s and 1970s, when those of us interested in large-scale, agrarian societies (instead of smaller-scale, "tribal" ones) ended up reading a great many "village studies." Therefore, when I imagined a village, I thought of such places as Mexican Zinacantan, famously described by Frank Cancian, with its community centre of mayor's office, church, and shops, and political hierarchy of civil and religious offices held by ambitious men working their way up the ladder to power and prestige (Cancian 1965). Closer to hand were a growing number of descriptions of Indian villages, such as Karimpur in Uttar Pradesh, well-known through the Wisers' pioneering study, *Behind Mud Walls* (Wiser and Wiser 1971). Karimpur's walled compounds—segregated by caste, served by village shops, punctuated by temples, and ruled by an elected *panchayat*—also evoked strong images of a clearly bounded and self-sufficient universe unto itself.

In fact, I had driven by Walangama many times while searching for weekly markets and deity shrines in the southern Kurunegala District and never thought "village." Then late one September's morning in 1974, following directions from a woman selling pottery in a *pola*, I stopped the car and my friend Shirani asked out the window, "Is this the village where potters live?" and we got out. An old woman later told me that in 1934, when she first arrived as a nervous 14-year-old bride, there was even less to see. Walangama's few houses then were all tiny mud and stick structures not even visible from the road. But forty years later, I was still vaguely disappointed by my initial glimpses of the place where I hoped to spend much of the next two years (and would in fact return to repeatedly over the next three decades).

Not surprisingly, there was more to Walangama than what I saw that first day. Most of the village lay off the road, beyond fields to the west. There I would find what are considered classic features of a Sinhalese village: an open expanse of paddy fields (*yaaya*), an irrigation tank (*wäwa*), and on the far side of the fields, more areas of palm trees, house gardens (*goDa iDam*), and scattered dwellings (*gewal*). But the village had no hub and public buildings were few. A simple, tin-roofed structure on the road turned out to belong to a government-sponsored pottery marketing co-operative and two low, open-sided buildings beyond the fields comprised a government school; but there were no village temples, no village shops, no village offices—in fact, in the 1970s, there were almost no village officials.

But as I got to know Walangama, a sense of community emerged. While hardly compact, the village did comprise a named locality albeit one whose borders were not perfectly clear. There was the larger, *de facto* village of intermarried and

labour-exchanging households that was concentrated in Walangama, but that also overflowed into neighbouring communities; and there was the smaller official Walangama of government records, which allocated these overflow households to the other villages for administrative purposes (such as giving out ration books and national identity cards). It was the larger, unofficial Walangama that emerged as a community, whose people worked together in the marketing co-operative, exchanged labour in paddy fields, and helped each other out at first menstruation ceremonies, weddings, funerals, and demon exorcisms. Furthermore, a third of all marriages were endogamous to Walangama, creating a dense criss-crossing of kin ties that supported people's claims that they were all one family (*eka pavula*).

Of course, kin ties also connected Walangama residents to people who lived in other villages, near and far, so residents sometimes recognized kin in ways that crossed through rather than reinforced village boundaries. Then they might say, *apee*, "ours," when referring to a marriage connection that seemed more important than connections by blood to people nearer by; or to a daughter who had married away, but who could be expected to return to lend a hand when help was needed, whose children might marry back to Walangama, and who should be afforded the same rights (such as access to the clay fields) as anyone else in Walangama. This last point, about clay, was the cause of persistent friction in the 1980s and 1990s between Walangama residents and government co-operative advisers who insisted that relatives who did not live in Walangama should *not* be allowed to use local clay, advice that Walangama people never heeded, saying they are "ours" (*apee*), not "outsiders" (*piTin minissu*) as the government representatives insisted (see Winslow 2002). Still, on the whole, despite such lurking ambiguities of who belonged and who did not, and although its dispersed, centre-less appearance and lack of internal political structure defied my preconceptions, I slowly became happier with the idea of "village Walangama."

My comfort was short-lived. It was not that the village disintegrated into factions or otherwise fell apart. It was simply that many of my 1970s hallmarks of community turned out to be transitory. By 1992, exorcisms had all but vanished, the marketing co-operative was on its last legs, agricultural work parties were far less frequent, and domestic celebrations commanded less and less assistance from any but the closest kin. So I was faced with a problem. Should I see Walangama as yet another example of "the disintegrating village"? Or had I chosen the wrong symbols of village-ness? I was uncomfortable with either choice. The village did not seem to be going downhill; people were prospering and they had undertaken a number of joint building projects, including a temple and a Montessori school (Winslow 1996). And how could I arbitrarily choose these activities as new emblems of community, what would keep those from changing over time? In the end, I decided that the

answer to each of my questions had to be, "No," that the problem lay not with Walangama but instead with my preconceptions of "villages."

III. The Three Stages of *Gama*

Gama is, of course, the Sinhalese word that corresponds most closely to the English word *village*. But *gama* also means simply landholdings of a group of people and may be translated as *hamlet* or sometimes even *estate* (Obeyesekere 1967:14). This variability of Sinhalese usage is recognized by most scholars. However, I think it is fair to say that many simply mention the ambiguity and then either use the English word village, or selectively employ village and hamlet according to variable standards. But when I looked back over this usage while reading a selection of village ethnographies, I found that there appeared to be a pattern, what, very roughly, might be called, The Three Stages of *Gama*.

> *Stage One*. The "village studies" of the 1950s and early 1960s, when the nature of what *gama* referred to was not much worried about; writers used the word village, perhaps glossing it as *gama*, and left it at that.
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> *Stage Two*. The "village studies" done from the late 1960s and the mid-1980s, when writers carefully explained how they and rural people were using the term, *gama*.
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> *Stage Three*. Rural studies since about the 1990s, when there has been greater attention to the engagement of local people with larger systems and what is now frequently referred to as the "traditional" village (that is, before recent changes) has become almost assumed, rather like Stage One.

A prime example of Stage One is found in Nur Yalman's *Under the Bo Tree*, a widely read, comparative study of kinship structure in different parts of Sri Lanka and southern India, based on fieldwork done in the mid-1950s (1954-1956) (Yalman 1967). Yalman called Terutenne, the community in which he spent the longest time, a Sinhalese "village," which he glossed as *gama*. However, if one looks closely at his maps and description, one discovers that Terutenne actually comprised thirteen separately named, caste-based localities, spread out over more than six square miles in a very hilly area[6] and that each of these localities also was referred to by its inhabitants as a *gama*. In his account, Yalman reserved the English word, *village,* to refer to this entire grouping *or* to the most populous locality where the high-caste people lived and where the government's official representative, the Village Headman, resided. Although the residents of the area used the same categorizing

[6] This is my own estimate, using a ruler and the topographic map of the Walapane Division that Yalman provides (Yalman 1967:25).

word—*gama*—for all of these groupings, Yalman chose not to. He referred to the other twelve lower-caste and smaller *gama* as *hamlets*. He did not defend his decision to go against local usage, even though it caused him some difficulty with determining how the hamlets and the "village center" were connected (Yalman 1967:24 ff.). In any case, perhaps because his concern was kinship, seen as a system of descent and marriage more than as relations to local place, he simply did not problematize village concepts, either his or theirs. One result was that Terutenne looked far more self-sufficient, more like a classic "village," than it otherwise would have.

A complicating factor in the case of Terutenne was that from colonial times on, the bottom level of the government's administrative field system was what were until very recently called Village Headman Divisions. These Headman's Divisions consisted of many—typically between twelve and twenty-five—separately named localities, each of which was also called (by local people) a *gama* (see, for example, the official village lists, such as Government of Ceylon, Department of Census and Statistics 1951). The Village Headman Divisions were set up for administrative convenience and the villages assigned to them were periodically regrouped for the same reason (so that a particular *gama* might belong to one Village Headman Division at one point and another some years later). Yalman's "village" appears to be such an administrative division; the Headman's office was located in the high-caste *gama* which being larger and having some shops also may have operated as a market centre for all the hamlets, even though its saliency as the centre of the larger village community (Terutenne plus hamlets) was quite ambiguous.

A second example of what I mean by Stage One *gama* would be Marguerite Robinson's study of the community of Morapitya, also in the Kandyan highlands, carried out in 1963 and 1967. She, too, used the word *village* to refer to a cluster of named localities, each of which was itself a *gama* (Robinson 1975). However, in another ethnography of the period, Edmund Leach (1971 [1961]) described a Dry Zone community that at least appeared to be quite unambiguously bounded. At the time of Leach's fieldwork (1954 and 1956), Pul Eliya consisted of 144 people of one caste who lived clustered above a tank. Leach's study might not fit my simple typology; what he termed a village seemed to correspond well with local application *gama* terminology. Nevertheless, Brow's work (discussed below) does tell us that the use of the word *gama* can be just as variable in the Dry Zone as it in the Kandyan highlands.

The next phase of village studies, my Stage Two, may have been initiated by Gananath Obeyesekere after 1961 fieldwork in a southern village that he called Madagama. In his book, *Land Tenure in Village Ceylon*, he provided a clear and meticulous discussion of the ambiguities of the term *gama*; this discussion went on to be cited by other scholars for decades (Obeyesekere 1967:12). Obeyesekere

explained to us that while Madagama was called a *gama*, it actually was made up of a number of named hamlets each of which residents also referred to as a *gama*. He suggested that, in fact, the larger grouping had only recently attained significance for residents because it was the "village" recognized by the government for "administration purposes, for the granting of aid, social benefits, etc." and that this "has forced the villagers to think of themselves as Madagama folk" (1967:12). For his study, Obeyesekere focused on the named localities within Madagama, tracing out the relation between descent and residence over time.

Thus Obeyesekere, faced with an on-the-ground situation apparently similar to Yalman's and to Robinson's, chose to recognize the artificiality of the larger "village" and concentrated on the smaller units as the *gama* units of both historical and contemporary significance. However, he also noted that because the government increasingly has made the larger administrative unit, Madagama, materially important to local residents, this local culture may change over the longer run. That is, just because it was not the "traditional" *gama*, does not mean that the government-created *gama* was not or would not be significant in the lives of local people. This is a point that reappears in more recent studies, as well.

Another example of Stage Two *gama*—research that is very attuned to local nuances in the use of the word and its implications for how a "village" is understood—is James Brow's 1968-1970 study of marriage connections among Sinhalese of Vedda ancestry in the Dry Zone. Brow, who cited Obeyesekere's discussion, came right out and opted to recognize the smaller unit as a village. He defined a village as "a distinct parcel of land occupied by a community of people who stand in a particular relationship to one another and to the land itself" (Brow 1978:59). Deploying this definition, Brow distinguished forty-six villages whose populations varied between 8 and 552, with the smallest consisting of a single household (Brow 1978:59). It is interesting to note in comparison that if Yalman had used Brow's standard, his single "village" of Terutenne would have become thirteen individually named villages, with populations varying between 19 and 339 (see Yalman 1967:26).

There were quite a number of village studies done in Sri Lanka during the late 1960s and 1970s. Generally, the researchers appear to have been aware of the ambiguities of *gama* and most of them also manifested Brow's concern to preserve local usage. Roderick Stirrat spent two years (1969-1971) in a fishing village near Chilaw, on the west coast of Sri Lanka. He, too, provided a nuanced discussion of how *gama* was applied by local residents; while he employed the village's official name for all of the hamlets, his text and maps carefully preserved the spatial distinctions the residents used. Paul Alexander, who also studied a coastal village but on the south coast (1970-1971), did not discuss *gama* in his ethnography, but he

did preserve a distinction between what he called the "official village" (the unit for which he could obtain government statistics) and the named localities within it to which households were attached (Alexander 1995:12-35).

However, other researchers writing in this period took a different tack: after noting the discrepancy between Sinhalese use of *gama* and their own expectations of what a "village" should be, they did not take the local-usage approach of Obeyesekere, Brow, and Stirrat. Staffan Ohrling, for example, an anthropologist who carried out a comparative study of development in several rural communities in Sri Lanka, wrote: "Only traditional communities with a specific social and economic structure ought to be called villages" (Ohrling 1977:xii). In similar vein, the political scientist, Mick Moore, called Sri Lankan villages "arbitrary" because they lack "the boundedness and the elements of partial autonomy and self-sufficiency which are normally associated with the term and are more in evidence, for example, in India" (Moore 1985:125). Nevertheless, whatever choices they made about what a Sinhalese village is, or is not, foreign researchers doing field research in rural Sri Lanka in the Stage Two period—the 1960s and 1970s—at least recognized the problem. That seems to be less true today.

Now, in Stage Three, many anthropologists doing research in rural Sri Lanka have moved away from studies confined to local *communities* to look at how local *people* connect to the many larger contexts—from village to nation and beyond—with which their lives are enmeshed. The result has been wonderful studies of women who work in garment factories (e.g., Lynch 1999) or abroad as domestic servants (e.g., Gamburd 2000); accounts of families who settle in, or are displaced by, colonization schemes (e.g., Sorensen 1996); and investigations into the consequences of civil war (e.g., Daniel 1996; Gamage and Watson, eds., 2000; Gamburd 2004). Not surprisingly, village studies have been transformed. Now, there is far less attention to *gama* and far more attention to how people manage their lives in difficult economic and political times; how they conceive of their identity amid expanding possibilities; and how they connect to the state.

Even those anthropologists who earlier had carried out the village studies I cited as defining Stage Two, have shifted orientation. In the 1990s, Brow returned to the northern Dry Zone Vedda to study community as a shared sense of "belonging together" (Brow 1996:12) rather than as locality defined by such materialities as land use and marriage ties. Brow found that interpersonal relations have been transformed by increased participation in the extra-village economy and increased penetration by the Sri Lankan State through programs and politicians. Stirrat's 1992 book is not about the Catholic village he studied before, but instead describes contemporary Sinhalese Catholics more generally as a group defined by shared commitments rather than shared spatial location (Stirrat 1992). He, too, discovered that their relations with each other have been affected by national politics and

economics, as well as the changed significance of adherence to a "foreign" religion (also, Stirrat 1998).

But talk about *gama* has not disappeared from either public discourse or social science writings. Sinhalese politicians (Brow 1996:82-87, Woost 1993) and Colombo advertisers (Kemper 2001:49) regularly evoke a romanticized conception of happy and harmonious Buddhist villages. More relevant for our purposes here is a parallel trend in some recent ethnographies. When these scholars talk about how villages used to be, they make some of the same assumptions that Stage One anthropologists made. But current researchers place in the past the unified, relatively autonomous, and bounded villages that those earlier scholars assumed they were observing around them. For example, in her 1996 book, *Relocated Lives: Displacement and Resettlement within the Mahaweli Project*, Birgitte Sorensen reported on two communities in an area of the Dry Zone where new irrigation facilities have been developed. One of these communities she calls an "old village" and the other she calls a "new settlement." Sorensen's book is an insightful account of the social and cultural effects of displacement. But I was a bit taken aback by the way she so easily used such terms as village, villager, and traditional village, and the fact that she does not discuss (or even gloss) the ambiguities of *gama*. When the old residents look back with longing at an idealized village past, she seems to look back along with them, mourning the loss of community solidarity without considering whether it ever was the community they now imagine.

Michele Gamburd's 2000 book, *The Kitchen Spoon's Handle: Transnationalism and Sri Lanka's Migrant Housemaids,* examines the effects of housemaid migration to the Middle East on a village in southern Sri Lanka. She concludes her perceptive and well-written book with a section entitled, "Rethinking 'The Village'." Here, she cautions us not to read the present village through our ideas of the past because, as she puts it, "...the migrant calls into question assumptions about the bounded, exclusive, and circumscribed nature of belonging in the village" (2000:235). But as I have been trying to show here, I think we should question those assumptions about the past, as well as the present.

In a way, we have come full circle. Early village studies looked for the unit that most clearly corresponded to their preconceived ideas of what a village should be. They found it by applying the word *village* to clusters of caste-based hamlets, rather than to the smaller, less self-sufficient hamlets themselves, even though it was the latter to which the Sinhalese applied the word *gama*. For a while, in the late 1960s and 1970s, village researchers paid more attention to Sinhalese usage and recognized that local ideas of community simply did not conform to either scholarly or governmental preconceptions. But then anthropological attention was diverted by other issues and the old notion of the "traditional village" has again become

deproblematized and taken for granted.

IV. Problematic Visions

I began this brief essay by asking if Sri Lanka's geographic location has affected how social scientists have drawn conclusions about Sri Lankan culture and society. To explore the question, I focused on the concept of the Sinhalese village as it has appeared in the work of primarily foreign anthropologists. My choice of topic, of course, was arbitrary; I could just as well have looked at gender or caste or other research topics instead. But by comparing a selection of ethnographies from the 1950s through the 1990s, I found that the idea of "the village" has changed over time; at times it did appear to derive more from researcher bias than from what was encountered in the field, and at other times, researchers seemed more aware of and responsive to how the way local Sinhalese people used the term *gama*. Interestingly, it was both the earliest and the most recent studies whose authors seemed to assume they knew ahead of time what a village entailed. In both, the village appeared to me assumed, not examined.

But did the "researcher bias" come from Sri Lanka's proximity to India? That is a more difficult question. I found few authors who made an explicit comparison between Sri Lankan villages and Indian ones; nevertheless, I contend that doing research in Sri Lanka was (and still is) influenced by the larger context of South Asia studies, in general, and India studies, in particular. The influence has come from at least two different directions. When Mick Moore wrote, as I noted earlier, of "the boundedness and the elements of partial autonomy and self-sufficiency which are normally associated with the term [village] and are more in evidence, for example, in India" (1985:125), I think he was reflecting a more general sentiment. I think that I, too, held such a bias, when I found the prospect of Walangama's shapelessness disconcerting, although, as I noted earlier, the general "peasant village" approach to agrarian societies that held sway in the social sciences was important alongside the hegemony of Indian studies for all South Asianists, whether they did research in India or not.

There also is another way in which proximity to India has affected our image of the Sinhalese village: through the lasting effects of nineteenth-century British colonial sociologies of Indian society, a subject that has been explored by a number of scholars for both India (Dewey 1972, Dumont 1966) and Sri Lanka (Moore 1989, Samaraweera 1973, 1978a, 1978b). Their work has made it clear that the idea of the village community that developed among colonial administrators was significantly influenced by the public lectures and writings of Sir Henry Sumner Maine (1822-1888). Maine was Regius Professor of Civil Law at Cambridge when he gave a series of popular lectures on his historical and evolutionist approach to the study of law at the Inns of Court in 1852. In 1862, just after publishing his first

major work, *Ancient Law* (1970 [1861]), Maine went to India as a lawyer for the government and a vice-chancellor of the University of Calcutta. He returned to England in 1869 to accept the new position of Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford, where he started off his tenure with another lecture series, published under the title *Village-Communities in the East and West* (Maine 1872). Maine described the "patriarchal village" in these words:

> ... In all cases the community is so organized as to be complete in itself. The end for which it exists is the tillage of the soil, and it contains within itself the means of following its occupation without help from outside. The brotherhood [agnatic kin group], besides the cultivating families who form the major part of the group, comprises families hereditarily engaged in the humble arts which furnish the little society with articles of use and comfort. It includes a village watch and a village police, and there are organized authorities for the settlement of disputes and the maintenance of civil order (Maine 1872:175-76).

Maine's village community was very much an ideal type whose importance was not intended to be ethnological, that is, a way of understanding the particulars of living Indian society, but historical and typological (Maine 1970 [1861], 1872, 1892 [1880]). The Indian case was important to Maine because it made it possible to use "observed Indian phenomena," rather than *a priori* assumptions about the natural state of man, to reconstruct the all-important stage of history that preceded modern civilization (Maine 1872:18). Nevertheless, Maine's construction of the patriarchal village community was taken to have more practical implications for British colonial administrators, such as John Stuart Mill (Cowen and Shenton 1996: 51), who thought that Maine's description was what true, uncorrupted villages *should* be like. This idea spread to Sri Lanka.

In 1859, Sir James Emerson Tennent, Colonial Secretary to Ceylon from 1845-1850, published a two-volume, all-inclusive description of the island, appropriately entitled, *Ceylon: An Account of the Island Physical, Historical and Topographical with Notices of its Natural History, Antiquities and Productions.* Despite being well over 1200 pages long, the work was an immediate best seller that went to five editions in the first two years after publication. It is said to have "secured more attention than any other contemporary publication of its kind" and to have influenced both British and Sri Lankan views of the island for decades (Gooneratne 1965:111-112). In *Ceylon*, Tennent devoted few lines to actual Sinhalese villages such as he might himself have observed; yet he gave over long passages to the splendours of ancient irrigation systems and the village communities

they supported. He alleged that his evidence came from archaeological excavation reports and from new English translations of Buddhist histories. But in his descriptions we also can see the influence of Maine, whose 1852 London lectures Tennent likely heard of and may well have attended since he was writing *Ceylon* at the time the lectures were presented. Here, for example, is Tennent's description of ancient Sri Lankan villages:

> Simultaneously with the construction of works for the advancement of agriculture, the patriarchal village system, copied from that which existed from the earliest ages in India, was established in the newly settled districts; and each hamlet, with its governing 'headman,' its artisans, its barber, its astrologer and washerman, was taught to conduct its own affairs by its village council; to repair its tanks and watercourses, and to collect two harvest in each year by the combined labour of the whole village community (Tennent 1996 [1859]:Vol. 1, 434).

In comparison to such an ideal, unrealistic but presumably widely known because of the popularity of Tennent's work, observed Sinhalese villages—"...merely groups of huts surrounded by fields..." to quote one colonial official (Denham 1912:23)—must have seemed very pale imitations. Colonial administrators in Sri Lanka frequently concluded that the villages they encountered were in decline. After Independence, post-colonial governments perpetuated this understanding, blaming the alleged demise of the village on colonial economic and political polices and failing to recognize the particular way in which Sinhalese Sri Lankans, at any rate, organized themselves into communities (Moore 1989). Even recently, rural development programs have been informed by such misunderstandings (Woost 2000).

So when researchers go to Sri Lanka, they not only may bring with them preconceptions about villages, they may also find them confirmed by government officials and government reports, both past and present. Ironically, scholars of India have demonstrated that the ideal "Indian village" often is not actually found there either. In fact, two international conferences, both of which produced conference volumes (Bardhan 1989; Breman, Kloos, and Saith 1997), have addressed the issue. The overall message of these works is that Indian villages always have varied a great deal, were rarely autonomous, and currently show evidence of increasing penetration of the state, horizontal linkages beyond the village, and polarization between rich and poor.[7] Nevertheless, even if there is more variability to the Indian village than many assume, the *idea* of the autonomous, harmonious, self-sufficient village has been important in scholarship and policy in India, just as it has in Sri

[7] For a similar reconsideration of caste in India and Sri Lanka, please see Rogers (2004).

Lanka.

Finally, does it matter? I think it does. I return to my own research by way of example. If I were to think that Walangama was once bounded and self-sufficient, then much of what I see today—the decrease of exchange labour (*attam*); the disappearance of village-wide offerings to the local area goddess; the closing of the marketing co-operative; the village's economic integration with the world beyond its borders—might look like social decline or even breakdown. But if I instead understand their concept of *gama* as less monolithic and more variable, so that it includes a variety of relations between people and territory that begin with the family and then work outwards, then a disintegrating village becomes a flexible one and my task is to explore the ways in which *gama* is changing, remaining a *gama*, but *gama* with a difference. This is, I think, a more accurate portrayal of Walangama today and one more respectful of their efforts and accomplishments.

I conclude by noting that from what we know of Sri Lanka's past there really is no reason to expect that Sinhalese villages would be like the colonial ideal of the Indian one. In the past, many villages seem to have been founded on the basis of direct grants to families from kings, aristocrats, or monasteries (Obeyesekere 1967). Over time, these became little groupings of kin-connected households, whose members farmed or fished and in return for land provided either grain or a caste-based service or craft. Unlike in some parts of India, many people in Sri Lanka did not have to work for higher castes to eat because they had their own land and produced much of their own food. There was rarely a basis for a Karimpur-like social organization. It also seems important that we remember that Sri Lanka is a small island, only about 140 miles across at the widest. For at least two thousand years, it has been at the centre of extensive regional networks of trade and travel, with ports on both coasts. Ancient roads connecting these ports crisscrossed the island. It is unlikely that much of the country was ever isolated from regional and foreign engagement (Bandaranayake et al. 1990).

Given these two points, it seems to me possible that after a century of government programs designed to remake old villages and construct new ones to conform to what they think villages should be, local communities today might actually look more like the imagined Indian villages than they did in the past. New villages often have compact settlements, village office buildings, and other markers of village structure and self-sufficiency (e.g., Brow 1996). But what I think the ethnography shows is that any sense of corporate community is in persistent tension with a foundational culture that *gama* is simply where one's family lives. Beyond that plain lived reality there are ties that connect one to other relatives near and far, to neighbours, to gods and their shrines, to monks and their temples, to political power holders, to markets and trading places. What seemed to us arbitrary, or

amorphous, was for many Sinhalese villagers—based on this sketchy review I can hardly claim all—the norm. Perhaps if Sri Lanka were off the coast of Thailand, whose villages were long stereotyped as "loosely structured" (Evers 1969), instead of India with its "little republics," we would more easily have been able to see it.

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