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The imagined spaces of empire: Modernity and material culture in colonial Ceylon/Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century the entry and circulation of new objects produced in the British Empire transformed the material culture in late colonial Ceylonese society. These transformations signaled a transformation of the native body and his/her relation to time and space of both community and Empire. The emergence of senses of belonging to Empire and new consumption patterns are significant enough to be mentioned in colonial texts and accounts of the period. These changes throw light on the connections between modernity, material culture and Ceylon's emergent imperial geographies.

KEY WORDS. colonialism, empire, space, imagined space, material culture, native body, modernity, imperial geographies, British empire

'The united luxuries of Europe and Asia are displayed in superfluous abundance'
Rev. James Cordiner, *A Description of Ceylon*, 1807, p. 111

Introduction

When Ceylon became part of the British Empire its material cultures underwent a drastic but selective transformation. New products that entered the market were immediately consumed or took root in the living space of some sections of the Ceylonese population. These new objects and artifacts surrounded them, and possibly redefined their dreamworld, transformed their bodies and reshaped their lives and those of their descendants. Since they were purchased and used we can assume that some of these objects – although they were not fabricated in Ceylon - reflect directly or indirectly their beliefs or at least a shift in their beliefs in time. Indeed, objects consumed became part of a culture in the making where they played an important part in mediating social and spatial relationships. Consumption generated an active mode of relations, not only with other goods but also with the

domestic collectivity and empire to which the domestic collectively notionally 'belonged' (Baudrillard, 1968).

When these objects entered the homes of the people of Ceylon/Sri Lanka the Empire was already present as a tangible reality as is evident from British civil servant John Ferguson's fascinating account of Queen Victoria's 1883 Jubilee celebrations in Ceylon on Galle Face Green Esplanade. On that day, services in four languages - English, Sinhalese, Tamil and Portuguese were held in all places of worship. The Queen's letter requesting that prayer and thanksgiving be offered was sent to all pastors demonstrating the Empire's willingness to personalize its rule. A large number of the poor in towns and villages were fed, each getting a measure of rice and five cents (one penny) or a piece of calico. This act of charity was followed by great celebrations at Galle Face esplanade where fifteen to twenty pandals (large decorative structures that describe the life of the Buddha and his teachings) were erected. They were decorated with loops of plantain and coconut leaf, green moss and fern, and yellow *olas* (palm leaves). Approximately 25000 people were present to hear the Governor read the Record of the chief events of the Fifty years'. The Royal Standard was hoisted and a salute of fifty guns was heard. The royal anthem was sung. A procession of two thousand people followed including 27 Buddhist monks and Arabi Pasha – who had led a revolt against the British in Egypt and would remain in Ceylon as an exile for 19 years - and three fellow exiles [1]. When school children sang 'God save the Queen', a young monk chanted a number of Pali stanzas, composed by the learned Venerable Sumangala in honour of the monarch, the Chief Incumbent of the Temple of Adam's peak and the president of Vidyodaya College.

The Empire was clearly a performative act: it was saluted and sung by all its subjects in an atmosphere suited to its majesty. But it was also made of a series of prosaic acts: in 1905 if a Ceylonese subject posted a letter to any part of the British Empire (except the Commonwealth of Australia) s/he would pay six cents for the stamp, while to Australia and all other foreign countries the cost was 15 cents, nearly three times higher. It was also through such everyday acts and practices that the Empire was made real for its subjects, rich, poor, colonized and colonizers[2].

In its heyday the British Empire governed roughly a quarter of the world's population, covered the same proportion of the earth's land surface and dominated nearly all its oceans. By the time of the British conquest of Ceylon that followed the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and the Dutch in the mid-eighteenth century, there were, in the western and south-western regions of the island signs announcing the burgeoning of modernity: the growth of towns, a moving labor force, the spread of the use of money, the rise in production and the expansion of long distance trade had broken the isolation and insularity of many people. More than any other empire in history the British Empire promoted the free movement of goods, capital and labor. Its growth was powered by commerce and consumerism.

Life moved at a slower pace for the rural folk than for the city dwellers. But if the large majority lived their lives in the village or district of birth some moved and wandered away from their places of birth following the economic booms of the period: plumbago, graphite mining and coconut. A few adventurous men and women even boarded ships that took them to Malaysia or Australia. Natives too were moving. In the 1901 census, for the first time information concerning the place of birth of the inhabitants of the island appeared: people were still very sedentary since 90 percent lived in the district of their birth:

> The Ceylonese are not naturally of a roving disposition and they seldom leave their homes if without so doing they can procure a moderate subsistence. [3]

The Port of Galle in South Ceylon was an important port of call for schooners and steamships until the later part of the nineteenth century when with Ceylon's expanding tea industry, Colombo took precedence as a port. Foreign contact with sailors and captains probably provided information about the bountiful lands on these trade routes. These contacts would have encouraged young people to leave. A few did leave for other lands. Most nineteenth century Sinhalese migrants to Malaya and as far afield as Tanganyika, Uganda, Kenya, Siam, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Australia and Thursday Island were from Galle and Matara and their hinterlands in the southern coast of Ceylon.

> The emigration of young men to the Straits, Burma and other places in search of employment continues to be on the increase. [4]

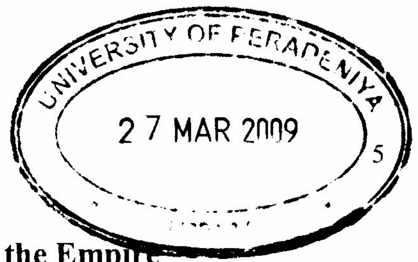
They were part of the empire, subjects of the largest system of domination in the world. Of this world even those who did not leave knew something through the foreign news despatches in the fledgling sinhala press, sporadic contacts with British government agents or through rumours that started in the work place or in the tea shops and spread at the speed of a bullock cart. The vagaries of a war in the Cape or in Europe, news of violence perpetrated on Muslims in the Orient reached them but did not perturb them. For those working in the new export industries changes in the world economy were however clearly felt. The First World War for instance affected the growth of the coconut industry. The island was, in that sense, closely connected to the rest of the world through ties of domination and economic exchange.

This paper explores the connections between modernity, material culture and Ceylon's emergent imperial geographies through a foray into new consumption patterns in Ceylon/Sri Lanka in the early twentieth century. It will explore the entry and circulation of some new objects produced in the British Empire as part of the

transformation of material culture in late colonial Ceylonese society. If objects define nature and ourselves, if they change the world, create it anew, and if we constantly rediscover and redefine the world through objects as Hannah Arendt (1993:197) suggested in the *Human Condition,* one can suppose that objects of empire opened up the horizons of the common person. Thus transformations in material culture signaled a transformation of the native body and his/her relation to the time and space of both community and Empire, a transformation that was largely incomplete but significant enough to be mentioned in the colonial texts.

The consumption of goods and objects cannot however be looked at in isolation, a tendency quite common among students of material culture. The facility with which these new objects were accepted in the homes of the people must be linked to a variety of enabling circumstances. Among these the rituals and practices through which the colonial state created a sense of allegiance to the idea of Empire and eventually a new cognitive space are crucial. The creation of a cognitive space of empire through news items in the press and advertisements would have facilitated the entry of new objects from familiar places into the homes of the literate middle classes. But the worldview of the non-literate classes is more difficult to fathom. We shall never know with certainty what their dreams were made of or what emotions they harboured but the study of the objects they bought and consumed give us a few clues on their inner life.

Another factor that would have helped the adoption of foreign goods by people of Ceylon was the human traces of Empire in the small crown colony that was Ceylon. Indeed men and women from different countries - all subjects of the empire - lived, worked and were exiled on the island. Lives had become interconnected across territories, seas and oceans. The exile of prisoners and rebels to other British colonies was a common practice in the Empire. Arabi Pasha and some of his followers were sent to Ceylon after he fomented an anti-colonial revolt in Egypt while the Kandyan chief Ehelepola was sent to serve his term of exile in Mauritius after the Kandyan revolt against British rule was put down in 1818. Other trouble makers were sent to India under house arrest. Ceylon was itself the home to prisoners of war who were sent to serve their term in penitentiaries far away from their homelands. The largest contingent of foreigners in the early twentieth century came to Ceylon in the wake of the Boer war. The first batch of South African prisoners of war arrived on August 1900 and other batches followed up to June 1901: a group of 4914 prisoners was interned in Ceylon chiefly at the camps in Diyatalawa, Ragama and Mount Lavinia. Some were kept on board the hospital ship Atlantian in Colombo harbor, some were on parole in the rest of the island [5].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Import of goods from Britain and the rest of the Empire

From the sixteenth century British expansion proceeded steadily, and the empire was the product of the new world systems built in the aftermath of the 'discoveries' – world systems which were rooted in colonial growth. The expansion of the British Empire from the sixteenth century was interrupted by the War of American Independence and a significant loss of territory and influence, with a consequent diminution of enthusiasm on the part of the British for colonial adventures. By the time of the Napoleonic Wars, however, Britain was recovering such interest and by the 1820s, having made considerable territorial gains, Britain ruled 26 percent of the world's total population. Between 1840 and 1860 the value of Britain's trade with the world had tripled. British manufacturers exported their goods to the rest of the world on British ships and railways, backed by British insurance and banking services. The British depended on 'the rest of the world' to supply raw materials and foodstuffs. The economic dependence was mutual but the power relation unequal (Hall, 2000: 7). In this Empire, Partha Chatterjee has argued that the variety of forms of rule was underpinned by a logic that he calls 'the rule of colonial difference' (1994). This was the rule that distinguished the colonizers from the colonized, that was predicated on the power of the metropole over its subject people (Hall, 2000: 6-7). When it comes to consumption patterns however, the rule of difference was shaded with ironic tints. The colonizer and colonized would buy the same jam for the same cost but consume it in either similar or different ways, either with butter and toast in one instance or with *pol roti* in another.

From within the empire and outside the privileged trade partners differed in time and according to the products as is reflected in the case of imported clothes. In the early twentieth century goods were imported from a variety of different countries. Half of the products still came from the United Kingdom and one third from British colonies. But Japan and Germany sent a considerable proportion of the cheaper qualities of cotton clothes such as banians, shirts and under garments. In bleached and printed piece goods England had a practical monopoly but Japanese imports of printed goods were on the rise. England and Holland supplied large quantities of sarongs, probably produced in Indonesia. In grey piece goods England supplied three fourths of the quantity and the USA, British India and Japan the remainder. Handkerchiefs, scarves and shawls came from the United Kingdom and Japan. Japan sent three fifths of the total amount of silk and satin after British India. Even a few woollen goods were imported: blankets from British India, cloth stuffs and flannel from the United Kingdom, scarves and shawls from Japan (Turner, 1922: 43). From the writings of the early twentieth century, the trade figures point to an influx of foreign goods. it was quite clear that Ceylon was now part of the

world system and that the decline of its own already weak textile industry was irreversible.

New consumption patterns

The capital city too was changing and growing into a more metropolitan space. The expansion of Colombo harbor and the building of a breakwater which was completed in 1884 confirmed Colombo as the major business centre of the island. A massive demographic change followed. People migrated from the countryside to the city looking for employment and greater economic opportunities, and in so doing were confronted with new, worldly 'cultural' offerings that they were unused to in the isolation of the village. From 1901 to 1911 the rate of population increase in Colombo was more than double that of the islands as a whole (Panditaratne, 1964: 206). In 1921 while the total population was 4 505 000, there were 33 principal towns - out of which eleven had a population larger than 10 000 - 15 000 villages. With urbanisation modernity found a privileged terrain. Turner has described the changes that took place in the cities quite predictably in the language of progress and development.

> Of the towns of Ceylon, the most important and progressive is the capital Colombo. It is the main business centre of the island, the seat of the government and its principal officials and the headquarters of the chief mercantile firms. It is consequently the most westernized of all the towns and possesses most of the refinements of modern civilisation, up to date hotels, electric lights, fans and ramways an excellent water supply, an up to date system of water borne drainage, an extensive emporia of goods of all kinds (Turner, 1922: 4) .

Although in 1911 the urban-rural divide was still pronounced, with the large majority of the population living in rural areas, town life was no longer unknown to villagers. For example, wealthy villagers sent their children to school in the nearest large town, and in 1912, Denham commented, 'The wants of a town have been created amongst the rural population' (1911: 158). The isolation of the village had been breached with the new Colombo-Galle road and the coastal railway. But the rates of the railway in the late nineteenth century were such that older modes of transport survived. In 1895 carters were competing successfully over short distances with the southern railway in Galle. In the western province the bulk of Kalutara traffic to Colombo went by other means than railway even by 1898. Most of the arrack and furniture produced in Kalutara and Moratuwa were transported in boats to Colombo[6].

Rituals of Empire: changing the internal space

Ceylon (as it was then called) became a crown colony in 1802 after being ruled for a few years from Madras. Although we can only regretfully surmise what people of the time thought of the idea of empire in the century and a half that followed, we can clearly identify the different ways in which the idea of empire modified the everyday life of people of the island. For one the space in which they dwelt and functioned was a constant reminder that they were part of an empire that spread across the seas. But mostly there were rituals that were enacted to celebrate the Empire and its rulers at regular points in time. One such ritual of belonging was the 1885 Jubilee of Queen Victoria's coronation as Empress of India. This foundational moment was preceded and prepared as it were by less important events such as the Royal visits of the Duke of Edinburgh in 1870, of the Prince of Wales in 1875 and the young princes Albert and George of Wales in 1881. According to Ferguson 'on each occasion the loyalty and devotion of the people to the British crown and their warm personal interest in the happiness and welfare of their sovereign were very conspicuous'(Ferguson,1887: 170). This connection was intimately soldered through the redrawing of the calendar where the government holidays were either Christian religious feasts or commemorated events related to the British royal family: 24th May: Queen's birthday; 28th June: Queen's coronation day; 26th August: Prince Albert's Birthday; 9th November: Prince of Wales's Birthday [7].

Empire as spatial identity: names, things, places

The city became a site for the celebration of empire and for the performance of rituals of belonging. It is in the cities that the new objects of consumption first found a welcoming terrain. The people of Colombo and other cities in the island gradually found that the space in which they lived was acquiring a new identity. Roads, buildings and provinces were renamed, the imprint left by the Portuguese and Dutch erased for ever. Perera (1999) has analyzed these transformations of space and the way in which British rule consolidated its control over the land of conquest through semantic appropriation Building on his comments we can try to find out if the idea of Empire, of a space that spread beyond the boundaries of the island entered the process of renaming. A number of streets of the Fort of Colombo were renamed during the years of British rule so as to evoke the connection with the metropolis, the most conspicuous being Queen street, Prince Street, Chatham street and York Street [8]. In Kandy a driveway was constructed around the lake and named after the Empress Victoria, as was the esplanade in front of the temple (Perera, 1999: 56). Most significant was Victoria Park, the sumptuous green space in the middle of the capital city where the British residents could take an evening stroll.

When addressing the issue of how names are read and perceived by passers-by Michel de Certeau perceptively writes that the words that hierarchize and semantically order the surface of a city 'slowly lose, like worn coins, the value engraved on them, but their ability to signify outlives its first definition'(de Certeau, 1988: 104). What he means is that words become 'liberated spaces that can be occupied' that articulate 'a poetic geography on top of the geography of the literal, forbidden or permitted meaning' (de Certeau, 1988: 105). So although the spaces of the city were 'imperialized' they were lived and perceived by the residents as a personal and totally ineffable experience. More importantly these spaces had by the early twentieth century shed their cultural anchorages and entered the floating realm of modernity, a realm in which the machine punctuated these symbolic, imagined geographies.

The machine

The rural areas resolutely laid claim to modernity with the conquest of the sewing machine and the gramophone. There was a time lag in the arrival of these different machines and their spread to rural and urban settings and evidently the use of imported fabrics preceded the adoption of sewing machines in the colony. While the gramophone that had become visible in the colony through advertisement and showrooms became a significant organising principle of a modern British colonial and Ceylonese upper class private home in urban areas, the sewing machine could be found in the most remote rural areas of the island. It epitomised the intoxication of modernity and its transitory character: it was easy to work, noisy, faster than human kind and an instrument of standardisation. It could create replicable serials at a much greater speed than a person. In this sense it was as much part of the driving power of modernity as photography or print. The commodified production of print in books, novels and especially newspapers, Anderson (1991) argues, made possible the dissemination of a national consciousness, by organizing distant and proximate events according to a calendrical simultaneity – of 'empty, homogeneous time' that enabled their readers to coordinate social time and space, and thus to conceive of relations to others across countries and continents (Wilson, 2000: 159-160). It is in this context that material cultures underwent significant changes.

With the sewing machine the human touch was subordinated to the machine's will, the particular was replaced by a reproducible model (Anderson, 1991: 182-183). Saree blouses, for instance, could be made in vast quantities as each person had a block pattern which the tailor referred to. The sewing machine contributed to the *coup de grace* of traditional weaving by its art of replicating rather than creating unique products.

In the late nineteenth century a number of companies were vying for the market. Among them were Wrenn Bennet and Co. which advertised 'the ideal sewing machine selling by thousands in England'[9]. The referent was Britain, the mother country of the imperial Raj.

Of the trading companies however, Singer, an American company was by far the most successful. Interestingly the American identity of Singer was never highlighted by its proponents or users and gradually seems to have been subsumed in a wider 'modern western imperial' identity. While 'for those living outside the United States, owning American products was a sign of Western modernity', international advertisements for Singer products suggested that less civilised people could become more civilised and more modern, more developed with the use of American products (Domosh, 2004 : 457). The first shop and office of the Singer Sewing Machine Company was established in Colombo in 1877 at No. 27 Main Street Pettah. In 1851 Singer introduced the first practical Sewing machine with two roller feeds. Subsequently it developed domestic straight stitch hand operated models. The machines were marketed through Singer owned retail outlets. After the first shop in Pettah branches were opened in Kandy, Galle and Hatton. Thereafter the Singer Sewing Machine Company was established and branches were opened in many towns throughout the island. People accepted the machines with open arms because Singer offered the Sewing Machine on easy payments from the inception.

Advertisements in the fledgling press were avidly read, just as much as the news accounts relating to countries where the products originated from. One cannot imagine that new objects such as the gramophone and the sewing machine would have entered the homes of the people of Ceylon if their world view had not been shaped by the press of the day. The terrain for the acceptance of the foreign object in their home was prepared by a gradual awareness of the rest of the world and its understanding as being part of the Empire. Literacy was an important factor that facilitated changes in worldviews.

The development of schools had led to a significant increase in the literate population. In 1911 there were five times as many literate females and twice as many literate males as thirty years before. Approximately 40% of males and 10% of females enumerated in the Census of 1911 were able to read and write. It may be supposed that numbers of people who could not read, were read to, at the workplace or after the day of work was over. These people too would have been touched by the new ideas contained in the press of the time.

The outside world was there in the newspapers and the books that were read in English and in translation. Thanks to the new telegraphic lines the reader was now in touch with the news from all parts of the world. The Ceylon Observer contained the latest telegraphic news by the Indo-European line, Singapore and Australian

lines as well as from India. It was the first 'Indian journal on Reuters list' and had correspondents in different parts of the world [10].

Among the literate classes of the Sinhalese there was certainly an awareness of the outside world that came from reading the foreign news section in the local newspapers. Other countries in the British Empire, especially South Africa, India and Burma figured prominently in local papers like *Lakmini Pahana*. Events were reported early thanks to the new instrument of globalization that was the telegraph. In 1900, a Sinhalese reader could follow all the details of the war in the Transvaal that pitted Britain against the Boers. He would be familiar with the geographical spaces across the ocean through a constant reading of names such as Transvaal or acquainted with the makers of history such as Kruger or Salisbury. He would also hear about the drought in India and railway construction in Russia. Another event that was well covered in those years was the Boxer rebellion in China known as the Chinese war. On the whole, world news was related to military developments that involved Britain in one or another way. There was also some interest in trivia: the number of women in the postal service or the amount of money earned by the Greek King[11] . But it was clearly not only empire that was given prominence. In these non-democratic days, kings, queens and royal families in the Empire and outside – mention was made of the passing away of royals such as the Italian king for example [12](*Lakmini Pahana*, 1 Sept. 1900) made the news rather than the lives of common people. The twenty-second birthday of the Prince of Wales in 1886 was reported in a Sinhalese language newspaper as an event of some importance.[13]

These newspaper items literally and figuratively mapped imperial aspirations. They also organized time and space in ways that welded the national and imperial interest, while effacing the crueler aspects of empire, colonialism and trade. In the past as today, the reader is obviously not passive. Every reading modifies its object. 'He invents in texts something different from what they intended. He detaches them from their (lost or accessory) origin. He combines their fragments and creates something un-known in the space organized by their capacity for allowing an indefinite plurality of meanings' (de Certeau, 1988: 169) . If one accepts with de Certeau, that the reader is a poacher one can think for instance that for some readers foreign news might have led to the production of a mercantilist world view in which trade and the accumulation of wealth appeared as the highest national good; for others it might have led to a sense of belonging and loyalty to empire; for still others it might have made manifest the somber realities of great power politics. Indeed since the idea of a community formed in a homogenous time is a utopia which scholars such as Partha Chatterjee (1994) have spelt out, the cognitive space of empire can only be characterized by heterogeneity. It is in this context that the consumer of newspaper advertisements and buyer of sewing machines must be understood.

An advertisement in the Sinhala paper *Lakmina* for Singer warned against imitations and expounded the after purchase servicing as well as the easy payment scheme [14]. Its first users were housewives and tailors. The first clothes sewn were jackets, shirts and sarongs.

A typical Singer advertisement went as follows:

'If you wish to reduce your tailoring expenses
If you wish to save your time
If you wish to see your family neatly dressed
If you wish to see your ladies engaged in useful and intelligent work at home'

[15] The appeal was clearly to the housewife as consumer and displayed a conventional perception of what a useful occupation was for the women folk of the country. As Domosh has shown in her work on five American companies, gender ideology was crucial to the configuration of culturally acceptable forms of mass consumption (2004:458) . The native stockist and buyer were however positioned as male as the term 'your ladies' indicates. Indeed at that time, urban upper middle class women were getting involved in Victorian leisure activities – such as piano playing – which were not considered useful by many nationalist critiques. The sewing machine reinscribed colonial Victorian templates of female respectability - such as confinement to the home, caring and looking after husband and children - and reproductive labour in the private sphere of the lower middle classes. Interestingly the sewing machine that embodied the Victorian values of work and thrift - unlike the piano a frivolous machine - soon shed its foreign image and became part of the transformed material culture of the common people. The singular fact that Singer was an American company did not appear in the advertisements whose creators clearly understood the immersion of the future buyers in a Victorian/imperial culture of work and values.

Some tailoring establishments such as Whiteaway Laidlaw & Co, and Drapers and Outfitters advertised themselves as users of sewing machines - an added proof of quality tailoring in 1918. With the conquest of the sewing machine the tailor too became modernised. *Hannalis,* the caste of Sinhalese tailors had never been numerous, since they worked mainly in the court of the kings. In the early nineteenth century they were described by Davy as being 'very few' in number. A century later tailoring had mainly become the preserve of Tamils and Burghers as the newspaper advertisements indicate (Ryan, 1993: 113-114)

Competing with Singer were other brands such as National and Pfaff, the former of which regularly advertised its product in the Sinhala papers as:

'New National sewing machine
No home is complete without this machine'

The machine was sold less as a useful item and more as a status symbol.[16] In that sense it contributed to consolidating more recent social hierarchies that were no longer based on class or name. The sewing machine was consumed as a sign either that consolidated one's belonging to the group or brought distinction from an erstwhile groups and reference to a higher social group (Baudrillard, 1968: 79). Pfaff sold it as an ideal Christmas or wedding present.[17] The sewing machine would gradually become a central part of the dowry of a middle-class woman in Ceylon. The appeal of the sewing machine also came from its unassuming size. Unlike other machines of the modern age such as trains or cars the sewing machine was human in its size and appearance.

Food

In 1894 an account of the Ceylon customs describes the various types of food stuffs imported to Sri Lanka from other countries belonging to the Empire: butter, cheese, ham and bacon, beef, salted pork, biscuits and bread from Australia, curry stuffs, ghee, onions, potatoes from India, sago from the Straits, fruits unpreserved from the UK, Austria, Arabia, India and Australia, salt from the UK, India and the Maldives, soap from India, the U.K and Germany.[18] New consumables of international origins, from the Empire as well as other countries, were now available for people to buy and for others to desire.

Food habits among the wealthier classes changed with the import of foreign products. The middle classes drank imported gin, brandy and whisky and as one would expect, they led the lifestyle of English gentlemen and women or what they thought was their lifestyle. Aerated waters were consumed commonly and manufactures had sprung up in the island to meet the demand. Cream Soda was among the most popular of drinks. Ferguson's Directory provides a list of manufacturers for 1903.[19] Particularly interesting is the extent of the spread of soda water and ice manufactures throughout the island: there were 15 ice and soda water mills in the Western Province, one soda mill manufacturer in the Central Province (Ampititiya) and Matale, three soda water manufacturers in the Eastern Province and three in the Uva Province.

The consumption of meat increased considerably as the rise in the number of butchers and in the number of cattle thefts prove. At weddings of wealthy villagers meat was now being served. Through the sharing of food at festivals a new basis for the social was being created. It was however in predominantly Christian and Burgher communities that meat was regularly eaten. In the daily food of the people too changes were taking place: tea coffee and milk were gradually replacing rice *conjee,* cold rice water and buttermilk. Tea stalls were springing up everywhere especially near railways. The 100 percent increase in the amount of condensed milk imported

between 1901 and 1911 reflected the change in consumption habits. The tea drinking world was expanding: in eighteenth century America, the central item in the rapidly changing society was tea as it replaced stronger drinks such as the popular rum punch. While by the end of the nineteenth century tea, a product grown thousands of miles away on plantations in the hill country of Ceylon or India had become as Hall relates, the symbol of English identity the act of drinking tea in Ceylon or in other colonies was a kind a inverse performance of belonging to the Empire, through the consumption of the sign of Englishness in the territories from which the raw materials for the 'cup of tea' came (1991: 39). 'Taking tea became a recognized ritual requiring the correct cups and saucers, sugar bowls and a collection of pots.... For all these Americans, drinking tea required cups that could hold extremely hot liquids and that in turn forced them to import the technically advanced ceramics that originated in Staffordshire' (Breen, 1986: 488).. A decision to buy tea led to other purchases for example an imported pewter or silver bowl. This trend was discernible in Ceylon in the middle-class households; the poorer classes would have used whatever utensils they had, adapting them to new modes of consumption.

In the same way people of means were buying prepared foods for children such as malted milk and Mellin's and Allebury's foods in an effort to emulate the food habits of the British. The popularity of tinned soups, meats and sardines was such that every bazaar was stocked with these products. In the city, Cargills and Co established in 1844 as general importers and warehouse was the largest department store and was known to have a particularly well stocked wine and spirit department. 'As regards the food supply, every care is taken that the beef and mutton supplied are imported. Australian frozen mutton is issued to prisoners of war and troops alike once a week, instead of beef. [20]

But most food habits remained the same in a country of rice eaters or were more forcefully intruded upon by foods from the subcontinent: *appa, indi-appa* came to Sri Lanka with Malayalee workers and became part of the national cuisine more so than any food from the West. In that sense the Empire had less influence on the fabric of everyday life than for instance the Portuguese colonizers who left in Sri Lanka the chili, the foundation of the national food regime.

Hygiene and home

The body was a key site of the colonial encounter as recent works in the field of colonial studies have suggested. Policies on the body in the Javanese colonial situation have been shown to have spawned 'a set of behaviours, a template for living, a care of the self, an ideal of domesticity' (Stoler, 2002: 1) . But in many of these studies the focus is the colonial encounter and genealogies of the intimate in the domestic space of the coloniser rather than of the colonised. Although this signals a paradigm shift in colonial studies there is still a need to narrate the transformation in the world views,

habits and material cultures of the colonised, and describe what James Duncan calls their 'embodied practices' through a reading of the margins of colonial documents (2002: 317-336). We know for instance that before the advent of 'colonial soap', people in Sri Lanka, a land generally endowed with natural lakes, rivers, waterfalls and hydraulic tanks, used to wash their bodies and clothes frequently with natural products such as sandalwood. 'No soap is used for washing clothes, dipping garments in water and striking them against a flat stone' was the most common method as described by Reverend James Cordiner (1807: 118) . Colonial documents are silent on the reactions of the natives to new products and on what types of concerns were voiced although the native body was an imagined space that generated pervasive concern in official, settler, missionary and planter's discourse and practices epitomised in the British civil servant E.B Denham's detailed account of the material culture of the natives (1912: 170).

In the colonial state, the colonised body was transformed gently as well as coerced and disciplined into becoming a docile body. Just as in South East Asia where the body of the native was described as different – Ann Stoler describes how Javanese nursemaids were instructed to hold their charges away from their bodies so that the infants would not 'smell of their sweat'- in Ceylon native bodies were considered lacking hygiene and discipline (Stoler, 2002: 6). On the plantations, workers resisted attempts to transform them into abstract, docile bodies by rejecting the highly routinized plantation regime through the few weapons of the weak – desertion, thefts, minimising work - they had at their disposal. But in a situation of unequal power they had to comply overtly (Duncan, 2002).

Through the contact with cosmetics the body of the native man and woman became both a desiring body and a healthier body more adapted to labour. This feature was important since the goals of the colonisers were essentially economically motivated. In the villages and cities hygiene was sold as a consumer product, while in the plantations a combination of western hygiene and control transformed the Tamil labourer from a 'weak, stupid, ill-fed, badly clad person' through being 'well housed, well cared for, well fed, and employed at regular and sufficient work' into 'a strong, intelligent, lusty labourer'(Duncan 2002: 326). Highly perfumed soap was in great demand in the first decade of the twentieth century. Even in the interior villages 'Cherry Blossom' and 'Famra' soap and powder were available in small shops and sold widely. Soap was sold at 35 cents a cake and talcum powders at 40 cents a tin. Among the popular perfumed powder was one called White Rose (Denham, 1912: 170), a name which married in one image the white colonial master and the rose, evoking the gentleness of his civilisation.

A letter to the editor of the *Sinhala Jatiya* castigated this new trend in women which was 'to waste money unnecessarily to beautify themselves, following the latest fashions and using strange things like perfume'.[21] Society's equilibrium that was

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between the dharmista and un-dharmista was clearly acquiring the traits of a consumption society where the equilibrium was between consumption and its denunciation (Baudrillard, 1968: 79). This critique of wastage made a value judgement based on the distinction between necessities and luxuries. What was feared indeed was the gradual imposition of a consumer culture as had happened in Europe. Modern consumption would produce a passive, subordinated population which would no longer be able to realize its 'real needs'. The consumer was now presented with a choice of soaps each adapted for a particular situation. An advertisement of the Chiswick soap company mentions a variety of soaps, including imperial and red poppy, odorless soft soaps, snowflake potash soap, saddle soap, saddle paste, and Chiswisk compound [22]. Later in the twentieth century in Africa, institutional forms of communication more advanced than in Sri Lanka in the early years of the century were used to spread the gospel of cleanliness and other colonial forms of propaganda - demonstration and cinema vans, radio, African newspapers, women's club, health lectures, mission schools, beauty contests and fashion shows (Burke, 1996: 189-212). The spread of soaps and powders in rural Sri Lanka as well as more direct 'Lessons of hygiene' in Africa were part of the general attempt to promote 'civilised' manners and discipline in the comportment of the self and the practice of everyday life in different colonial situations. Thus with the acquisition of new hygienic habits and the entry of new products into the homes of the natives throughout the empire, a process of homogenisation was taking place.

The home of rich and poor had undergone many transformations under Portuguese and Dutch rule. One of the few detailed accounts of the furniture in an 'ordinary villager's house' is given in Denham's report of 1911. With the sense of detail of an apothecary he described the furniture in the house of a villager in the Colombo *Mudaliyar*'s division[23]. The furniture was mainly functional but of good quality, for instance, a satinwood almairah and jackwood bed was mentioned. The wall had a few Buddhist pictures and the only concessions to frivolity were the mirrors, wineglasses and a clock. In Kalutara a villager's house contained pictures of the Buddha published and sent out by the Mellin's Food Company as an advertisement of their foods, together with a portrait of the late John Kotalawela. Religious memorabilia reproduced en masse was fast becoming for commercial companies a useful means of promoting their goods for mass consumption. The pictures on the walls in other simple households were also generally of a religious nature: saints or Virgin and Child or birth and renunciation of Prince Siddhartha. Pictures of Kings and Queens of Europe too were popular and available even in shops in interior villages. These images linked colonised subjects across the subcontinent in an imagined community of servants of the Raj. In the house of a *Vidana Arachchi*, Japanese pictures hung on the walls. Western style hygiene was also entering the home with dressing tables in bedrooms, combs and hairpowder boxes. The custom had been to have the toilet and

bathroom separated from the rest of the house. The entry of these new objects into the life of the people of Ceylon was guided by individual choice as well as forced upon by market trends. The consumption of foreign textiles was the best example of the latter. The impact of these objects in their materiality and presence in the homes of people is difficult to fathom. There seemed to have been a fashion for foreign goods. G.A Marinitish and Co based in Queen Street, Colombo advertised goods in a manner that stressed a foreign origin: Austrian pine flooring and ceiling boards, Austrian pine tea chests, French Portland cement, Italian ornamental flooring tiles, Austrian iron safes. The impact of these foreign goods, it has been suggested went beyond simple changes in the layout of homes. In eighteenth century America 'consumer goods became topics of conversation, the source of a new vocabulary, the spark of a new kind of social discourse'(Breen, 1986: 496). This might have been the case, but their impact in colonial Ceylon must not be overemphasized. Indeed the changes these objects brought must be weighted against all that did not change in the material culture of the people: in the home, people still slept on mats, ate on the ground with their fingers, slept in sarongs, oiled their hair and drank the local brew rather than gin and tonic[24].

Conclusion

For Walter Benjamin, urban objects, relics of the nineteenth century like dream-images were hieroglyphic clues to a forgotten past (Buck-Morss, 1991: 39). Objects consumed by the Ceylonese under late colonialism tell us of a growing bourgeois consciousness typified by commodity fetishism. But unlike in the metropolis, modernity in the colony came with a sense of outwardness rather than inwardness. This perception of the outside world was not limited to reaching out to the Empire at large but infused older currents with new energies. In the late nineteenth century the awareness among Buddhists of a worldwide community of their co-religionists was sparked by the movement spearheaded by a lay preacher called Anagarika Dharmapala to protect and restore Buddha Gaya the holiest Buddhist shrine. In 1891 during his pilgrimage to Buddha Gaya he began correspondence with Buddhists of 'Ceylon, Burma, Siam, Japan, China, Arakan and Chittagong'. The Maha Bodhi Society established in that same year had a clear pan-Buddhist approach. Dharmapala traveled the world to mobilize public opinion against the destruction of the holy site and even raised money from Buddhists of Ceylon and Burmese Buddhists to purchase the Maha Bodhi village at Buddha-gaya (Guruge, 1965: 615-626). Newspapers made frequent allusion to other Buddhist countries especially Siam, even in non-religious issues as for instance in July 1900 in the news item relating how the king of Siam was trying to do away with the slave trade.[25]

People's consciousness of being Buddhist in a modern world was shaped by the outwardness of its new bourgeois propagators, such as Anagarika Dharmapala who traveled the country in an automobile to convey the message of Buddhism for the new age. In contrast the Empire in Ceylon was imagined as an Empire of objects and goods, of tea, jam and Bovril, an empire founded on needs rather than an empire made of men and women who settled on the island which explains perhaps both the facility with which it was dismantled and the resilience of ties between the former colonial power and former colonies to this day. Political ties changed but material cultures remained deeply embedded. The transformation of material cultures was not uni-directional: there was an influx of goods, practices, peoples and speech patterns into the societies and cultures of the imperialists through the colonial encounter. But clearly – even if curry became part of British cuisine, material cultures underwent deeper and more lasting changes in the colonized world.

The little farmers of Chesapeake county declared their independence from consumer goods just as the working people of Boston did when they dumped the tea into [26]the harbor and the Sinhalese nationalists did when they called on their compatriots to refrain from wearing the clothes of the white men and adopt the *arya* dress instead. Once that symbolic link between England and America and later Sri Lanka had been severed, once common men and women asserted their control over the process of acculturation, the political ties of empire quickly unraveled (Breen, 1986: 499). But the Empire remained as a representation, and as a space identified by different names; as Commonwealth, English speaking world, 'civilized' world it lingers on.

Notes

1 John Ferguson, *Ceylon in the Jubilee Year,* London: John Haddon; Colombo,:AM and J. Ferguson, 1887, p. 176

2 *Ferguson's Ceylon Directory 1905*, Colombo, Ceylon Observer press, p. 249

3 The Census of Ceylon 1901, Vol. I, containing the review of census operations and the results of the census of Ceylon 1901, Colombo: H.C. Cottle, acting Government Printer, 1902, p. 118

4 ibid., p. 62

5 Among the prisoners were representatives of 24 different races, 31 countries and 152 occupations. Some of the nationalities of the prisoners of war were: Free Staters 3209, Transvaal Burghers 782, Boers 594, Dutch 107, Frenchmen 23 and Americans 18; Census of Ceylon, 1901, Vol. i, op. cit., p. 165

6 *The Ceylon Observer*, 4 December 1897; Public Record Office, CO 54/580, Under-Secretary of State 10 July 1888; Ceylon Administrative Report, Colombo, Ceylon Government Printer, 1895.
7 Ceylon Almanac and Annual Register for 1861, Colombo, William Skeen, Government Printer 1861, p. 10.
8 Ibid., p. 49.
9 The Ceylon Examiner, 23 March 1896
10 Catalogue of Newspapers, periodicals, Books, Maps' compiled by A.M and J. Ferguson in Ferguson's Directory 1895, pp. 4-5
11 Lakmini Pahana, 28 July 1900
12 Lakmini Pahana, 1 Sept. 1900
13 *Dinakara Prakasha*, 6 Feb. 1886
14 *Lakmina Pahana,* 4 Jan.1895
15 *The Ceylon Independent*, 6 February 1904
16 *Lakmini Pahana*, 19 Jan. 1918
17 *The Ceylon Independent*, 6 February 1903, p. 7.
18 *Ferguson's Directory, 1895,op.cit* pp. 607-8
19 *Ferguson's Directory, 1903*, Colombo, Ceylon Observer Press, p. 327
20 Census of Ceylon 1901, op. cit, p. 165
21 *The Sinhala Jatiya*, 1 Feb. 1923.
22 *Ferguson's Directory 1895*, p. 870b
23 The Mudaliyar was the chief headman and the administrator of a korale in British times.
24 The strong counter-currents to 'westernization' built around the notion of ' authenticity' have been explored in some of my previous work. See Nira Wickramasinghe, *Sri Lanka in the Modern Age. A History of Contested Identities* (C. Hurst London, 2006), Chapter 3. National Framings: Authentic Bodies and Things, pp. 73-111.
25 *Lakmini Pahana*, 21 July 1900.
26 Kathleen Wilson, *A new imperial history: Culture and identity in Britain and the Empire 1660- 1840*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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