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Book Review

Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History, edited by Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern, London, UCL Press, 2017. xiv, 340 p.

The significance of this volume of twelve essays lies principally in its collective effort to reassess the importance of global connections in Sri Lanka's history up to 1850. Previous historical writing had sporadically dealt with this theme. For instance, in the area of ancient history the writings of Sri Lankan scholars such as Senerat Paranavithane, Senake Bandaranayake, and Sudarshan Seneviratne have placed Sri Lanka in the context of archaeological research in India. Historians of medieval Sri Lanka, notably Sirima Kiribamune, W. M. Sirisena, and S. Pathmanathan paid considerable attention to extra-local linkages. Writing on more recent Sri Lankan history, Jorge Flores, S. Arasaratnam, and John Holt (to name but a select few) have made significant contributions to our understanding on how the external world was perceived and received in Sri Lanka up to the mid-19th Century. Furthermore, thanks to the scholarship of a new generation of scholars (including the editors of this volume), we now know much more on how Sri Lanka was part of the wider worlds of Sanskrit literature, Buddhist learning, Cola power, Islam, and of Western

colonial empires. Nevertheless, with the growth of the nationalist movement against British colonial rule and the first half century of independence, the emphasis by many historians (including myself) has been on the study of Sri Lanka as a unit. As the editors point out, internal ethnic conflict in recent times has also led to a continued emphasis on the evolution of Sri Lanka and its peoples at the expense of how Sri Lanka engaged with the world beyond its shores.

The volume itself is largely a product of a series of seminars and workshops organized in Colombo, London, Cambridge (UK), Boston, and Madison (Wisconsin) between 2009 and 2012. It is marked by a very high standard of scholarship and analysis. Indeed, all contributors try, generally successfully, to balance the view of Sri Lanka as an Indian Ocean island with an appetite for the foreign against the contrary view of Sri Lanka as a distinct entity maintaining its cultural autonomy despite all challenges. Alicia Schrikker and Kate Ekama, for instance, view slavery under the Dutch in the eighteenth century both as a way to better understand types of bonded labour in Sri Lanka and as a window to Sri Lankan participation in the Dutch legal world. Given the purpose of the volume—the placing of Sri Lanka in a broader context—it is laudable that the contributors have not yielded to the temptation to magnify Sri Lanka’s linkages with the outside world beyond available evidence. Indeed, there are examples to the contrary. Rebecca Darley, in an excellent chapter analyzing numismatic evidence, suggests that prior to the 4th Century AD, Sri Lanka’s trading links might well have been more limited than hitherto thought.

The collection also marks important advances in our understanding of indigenous developments. Sujit Sivasunderam aptly remarks (212) that “Indigeneity feeds off, reacts against and informs cosmopolitanism.” The two forces—local and global—

interact with each other. Sivasunderam points out that while the British conquerors sought to appear like Kandyan kings, Kandyan elites sought to link themselves with British royalty. He also points out that encounters with the British were characterized by violence as well as free association. Gananath Obeyesekere's analysis of interactions between the Nayakas and the Westerners sagaciously questions the accepted view that the Nayaka kings were less popular because they were seen as foreign by the Kandyan Sinhalese. Alan Strathern makes interesting comments on "the function of the foreign in dynastic systems" incidentally comparing "foreign" rulers in Sri Lanka and England. Sujatha Meegama's scholarly analysis of the use of European prints to design ivory caskets in Sri Lanka (including one that is at the University of Peradeniya), in comparison to the use of such prints by artistes in West Africa and Latin America, makes an argument for the creativity of local artistes. As the editors point out, this turns the conversation on the ivory caskets from one on "European influence" to one on "local appropriation."

A conscious objective of the editors is also to introduce Sri Lankan materials into debates on world history. They are correct in stating that published historical research on Sri Lanka has not been used extensively in theorization on world history. With significant exceptions, Sri Lankan historical research has also not been in the forefront of incorporating or challenging existing theoretical formulations on world history. The editors have sought to use the case of Sri Lanka to challenge Sheldon Pollock's assertion that areas adopting a Sanskritic culture (unlike those of the West) did not develop local ethnic identities. Strathern comments that Sri Lanka sits "uncomfortably within some of Pollock's generalizations" (227). In addition, Zoltán Biedermann's study of Sri Lankan exiles in the Portuguese empire raises wider questions on exile and power relationships.

One of the difficulties of edited volumes is the maintenance of coherent themes, and the editors have done well in tying very different historical investigations together. The extensive footnotes are a delight. For some unfathomable reason, there are separate (though comprehensive) bibliographies for every chapter. They could well have been combined into one bibliography for the whole book.

This is a scholarly book and is dense in parts. Nevertheless, it brings us views of well-published scholars, and the collection conforms to the highest standards of the historical enterprise. Historians in Sri Lanka and elsewhere will profit by it, and it should be in every major library. The book can be downloaded free at <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press/browse-books/sri-lanka-at-the-crossroads-of-history>.

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