



## **A Requiem in Many Movements: Obeyesekere's Reordered Opus of the Last Sri Lankan King**

Review Essay of:

Gananath Obeyesekere's *The Doomed King: A Requiem for  
Śri Vikrama Rājasinha*. Colombo: Sailfish, 2017. 409 p.

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When Gananath Obeyesekere retired from the Princeton University Department of Anthropology in 1999, he began another stage in his prolific career. Over the past two decades, he has produced two large volumes of comparative history, one on cross-cultural readings of rebirth and karma,<sup>1</sup> and another on awakening and transcendent visions.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, he continued his longstanding pursuit of Sri Lankan history as expressed in its folk poetry, dramatic ritual, and vernacular chronicles. This new work has included Sinhala publications

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<sup>1</sup> Obeyesekere 2002a

<sup>2</sup> Obeyesekere 2012

of manuscript literature,<sup>3</sup> and investigations into the political and religious history of the Kandyan kingdom.<sup>4</sup>

In line with this research, Obeyesekere's most recent book, *The Doomed King: A Requiem for Śrī Vikrama Rājasinha* (Colombo: Sailfish, 2017), focuses on the fall of Kandy, and the man demonized for losing his crown.<sup>5</sup> Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha (r. 1798-1815) was the last ruler of the last autonomous kingdom of Sri Lanka. Obeyesekere contends that the popular historical memories of Śrī Vikrama as a drunken torturer and mass murderer stem from British histories, which were really a transposition of colonial traits onto the king they deposed and replaced. Such negative images of the king persist in scholarly accounts,<sup>6</sup> as well as media like Sugath Samarakoon's 2014 film *Æhælēpoḷa Kumārihāmi*, its loose plot containing one scene after another of hyperbolic rage or debauchery by Śrī Vikrama.<sup>7</sup>

Choosing a local press for publication, Obeyesekere explained: "I am directing this book primarily to Sri Lankan readers. It is they who will benefit most from re-reading our past."<sup>8</sup> To this end, he uses a writing style that can openly provoke, but which also uses humor to disarm: "I employ occasional polemics in these pages and plenty of irony, sarcasm, and a touch of what my colleagues think of as levity if not downright vulgarity and a chronic indulgence in punning and alliteration."<sup>9</sup> So *The Doomed King* is not ultimately for Obeyesekere's

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<sup>3</sup> These were printed in 2005 by S. Godage Publishers. For an overview, see: Obeyesekere, Kumara, Weeraratne and Krishore 2006

<sup>4</sup> Obeyesekere 2002b, Obeyesekere 2004a, Obeyesekere 2004b, Obeyesekere 2015, Obeyesekere 2010, Obeyesekere 2017a

<sup>5</sup> Obeyesekere's book thus compares to another recent history attempting to rehabilitate a king maligned for losing out to a colonizer—Bhuvanekabahu VII and his diplomacy with the Portuguese. See: Strathern 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Aldrich, for example, perpetuates the colonial "oriental despot" stereotypes of Śrī Vikrama as a violent and alien king. See: Aldrich 2016, Aldrich 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Devinda Kongahage's 2018 film *Girivāsipura* offers a more noble and heroic portrait of Śrī Vikrama. It has been pitched in promotional media as a film to unite Sri Lankans, as it intersperses some Tamil dialogue with the Sinhala, and is the first Sinhala film to include a Tamil song.

<sup>8</sup> Obeyesekere 2017b: 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid: 12.

colleagues, although anthropologists and historians of South Asia are likely to have much interest in it. Its jocular prose makes for an engaging tale of royal intrigue, colonial espionage, upstart chiefs, and folk poet politics. Obeyesekere nevertheless includes all the footnoted rigor of a good history, reading British and Sinhala sources against one another.

With this research, Obeyesekere questions several dominant historical narratives throughout his book, composing a requiem for a misunderstood king who “had a bad press.”<sup>10</sup> His new melody plays across movements that cast the chords of history in thematic arrangements, his arguments repeating with a rhythmic regularity. This review outlines the theses of *The Doomed King*, explaining how they revise understandings of (1) colonial sources, (2) Sinhala compositions, and (3) Sri Lankan nationalist myths. Finally, I conclude by contributing other pieces of unstudied Sinhala poetry about Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha, which will hopefully deepen Obeyesekere’s arguments.

## **1. Colonizers projecting their own sins onto the colonized**

*The Doomed King* provides new paradigms for reading the private notes and published prose of colonial agents. Its central colonial character is John D’Oyly (d.1824). Obeyesekere recasts D’Oyly by refuting his reputation as a bookish scholar who diligently studied Sinhala until fluent. Instead, D’Oyly is a master spy of the empire, bumbling with broken Sinhala to collect reports of informants, his interactions with monks and ministers being pure political machination (109-26). Aided by the embargo economics of British imperialism, D’Oyly operated in a shadow economy of bribes, where cash and luxury goods, like pocket-watches, fine clothes, or hunting rifles, bought information from local chiefs, in a rumor mill that spun outward from the capital of Kandy (54-8, 180-5). In his espionage, D’Oyly led the minister Æhælēpoḷa, who betrayed Śrī Vikrama, to believe he could be king instead, when true British imperial policy dictated that this deal with Æhælēpoḷa would never be honored (57).

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid: 27. Parenthetical citations of pages from this book will be used in the following sections.

Focusing on this colonial chicanery, Obeyesekere argues that British sources are unreliable as evidence for Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha's alleged tyranny. He critiques historians who uncritically absorbed reports about Kandyan atrocities in the failed British invasions of 1803 and 1804. British officers like John Davy attributed improbably grotesque terrors to the king, uncorroborated by any Sinhala sources. These included mass executions of monks, and public impaling spectacles that seemed more like European executions, as "Davy seems to have invented from British practices where crowds gathered at executions in a carnival-like atmosphere" (81). Likewise, the British acted especially horrified that mutilation was a punishment under Kandyan law because it had so recently been "permitted under British law until the late eighteenth century, in much less benign fashion" (167). Similarly, British claims that Śrī Vikrama was addicted to drink are reversed by Obeyesekere, who argues it more likely that the king "was totally abstemious," only procuring wine for his English prisoners of war. Like their violence, it was the colonizers' own alcoholism being reimaged onto the king: "From [Governor] Brownrigg's perspective, sensuality and alcohol consumption were considered pathological as far as Śrī Vikrama was concerned, even though the consumption of 'spiritous liquors' were normative among Brownrigg and his cohorts, and huge amounts of arrack were being manufactured..." (56).

Obeyesekere reaches the crescendo of such misleading colonial propaganda with a singular event—Śrī Vikrama's execution of Æhælēpoḷa's family. He does not deny it happened, but recasts it in the context of Kandyan law, wherein Æhælēpoḷa, by betraying the king, knowingly ceded his family as hostages, assuming the risk of their execution by failing to appear when summoned to court. Far from an act of irrational tyranny, the royal order of execution was the next legal step. While Obeyesekere acknowledges, "it is a terrible law," (198) he places blame squarely at the feet of Æhælēpoḷa, who chose to stake his kin against the kingdom he hoped to win (299).

Yet exaggerations of cruelty in this execution were the greatest of any smear campaign against Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha. To explain this, Obeyesekere uses his familiar theoretical device of the "myth model" to reconstruct "the pounding episode"—a rumor claiming Śrī Vikrama

forced Æhælēpoḷa's wife to publically pulverize the head of her child with a mortar and pestle.<sup>11</sup> That such a salacious story was so successful speaks to the power of its myth, which “deals with profound or symbolic truths that nevertheless operate in everyday life” (198). Obeyesekere shows multiple iterations of the skull-smashing myth in Sri Lankan colonial history, with instances from Portuguese and Dutch periods: “These events may or may not be true in any literal sense but they represented a popular genre prevalent over a long historical period, ...a myth model that gets reproduced time and again as an expression of unmitigated cruelty and the killing of innocents” (200). Śrī Vikrama was just another canvas for the portrayal of this myth. It was expedient for the British to cast him as the “oriental despot,” but these tropes of gruesome cruelty had a long history in Sinhala literature, too.

## 2. Comparing Sinhala sources and colonial conversations

Obeyesekere's attention to Sinhala literature produced in the early-nineteenth century helps organize his timeline for Śrī Vikrama's mythic fall from grace. Obeyesekere provides a novel comparative analyses of three poems: *Imgrīsi Haṭana*, *Kirala Sandēśaya*, and *Æhælēpoḷa Varṇanāva*. The first was a composition in praise of Śrī Vikrama written soon after his victories in the 1803-1804 wars. The latter two works were critical of Śrī Vikrama, supporting Æhælēpoḷa as the true king. *Imgrīsi Haṭana*, or “The English War,” detailed Śrī Vikrama's good works and lorded his victory over the British, humiliating officers by name. Obeyesekere has thankfully included much of Udaya Meddegama's translation of *Imgrīsi Haṭana* as an appendix (345-67).<sup>12</sup>

Obeyesekere reads *Imgrīsi Haṭana* as a window into Śrī Vikrama's political philosophy, refuting the idea that the king's rebuilding of Kandy as a cosmic city was a decadent waste of money, and met with public scorn. To this end, Obeyesekere openly revises his own

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<sup>11</sup> This rumor is relayed as fact in Aldrich 2018, 42.

<sup>12</sup> This translation was first commissioned by Sujit Sivasundaram, whose own book on this period of Sri Lankan history pairs well with *The Doomed King*. See: Sivasundaram 2013.

theories about royal infrastructure from earlier in his career (212-13).<sup>13</sup> He argues that new temples, palaces, and lakes were enacted kingship ideals, a style of rule supported by most Kandyan nobles, the same group who rebelled against the British in 1818 with fatal results (126-40). Also welcome for the study of South Asian kingship is Obeyesekere's reexamination of Śrī Vikrama's "royal circuits" (*gaman māligāva*) throughout the country. British observers misinterpreted this as the skittish movements of a paranoid king, but Obeyesekere portrays it as a form of governance, so that, far from being a drunken figurehead, Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha was a hands-on ruler who micromanaged many disputes in his kingdom (151-66).

The later anti-Rajasinha poem *Æhælēpoḷa Varṇanāva*, or "Praise of Æhælēpoḷa," inverted the model of *Imgrīsi Haṭana* by naming British officers as allies instead of enemies. Obeyesekere uses the insults of *Æhælēpoḷa Varṇanāva* to date it vis-à-vis *Kirala Sandēśaya*, or "The Lapwing's Message." *Kirala Sandēśaya* also claims Æhælēpoḷa as king, but has a vague picture of Śrī Vikrama, without mentioning the execution incident. Obeyesekere therefore concludes that *Æhælēpoḷa Varṇanāva* was the later work, having had time to absorb the myth-model of the king's cruelty propagated by the British. Obeyesekere also notes how *Æhælēpoḷa Varṇanāva* tempered Æhælēpoḷa's ambitions, lauding him as only a "sub-king" (*yuva-raja*), after the British dashed his delusions of full royal grandeur that had been expressed in *Kirala Sandēśaya* (93).

Obeyesekere thus displays the deft maneuvering between multiple sources that is needed for precisely reconstructing political histories through these anonymous compositions. As the colonial collapse of courtly culture eliminated royal chronicles, popular writings filled a power vacuum in the Lankan literary arena—"a field of action that held both winners and losers; ...literature functioned as a technology of production that reinforced other technologies of power."<sup>14</sup> Power thereafter manifested in local chronicles and poetry leaflets (*kavi-koḷa*) that disseminated anti-royal propaganda, like *Sulu Rājāvaliya* and

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Obeyesekere 1984: 338-46.

<sup>14</sup> Hallisey 2003: 714, 741.

*Peralī Haṭana*, which Obeyesekere mobilizes to show the myth of Sri-Vikrama-the-villain persisting into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (266-87). In answer to minstrels who first sang these songs, and the printing presses that disseminated them, Obeyesekere wrote a new requiem for the king.

### 3. De-lionizing a nationalist myth

Obeyesekere, however, does not want his replaying of Sri Lankan history to be turned into a nationalist anthem, or “a species of pseudo-patriotism” (13). His history also debunks certain myth-models deployed for the ends of Sinhala triumphalism. Following other Sri Lankan scholars,<sup>15</sup> Obeyesekere documents the extreme anti-Tamil rhetoric used in Sinhala poems of the period, calling both *Kirala Sandēśaya* and *Æhælēpoḷa Varṇanāva* “outrageously anti-Tamil” (83-101). Obeyesekere explains how “Tamil” was a catch-all term for foreigners, even Europeans at times. Śrī Vikrama, of the Telugu Nayakka family of South India, was thereby contrasted with *Æhælēpoḷa*’s local lineage in Sri Lanka’s Sabaragamuwa province. The British literalized such rhetoric into racial divides, solidified and justified through colonial censuses.

The historical artifice of the Sinhala-Tamil divide, however, is relatively old news in Sri Lankan studies. Obeyesekere’s true *coup de grâce* is his undermining a central symbol of Sinhala nationalism—the lion flag. He explains: “It is of course true the Sinhalas were the people of the lion and the lion symbolism was everywhere in Sri Lanka, but this is different from saying that it was the ‘national’ flag of the Sinhalas from the very beginnings of the nation” (237). No Sinhala works actually mention a lion flag among royal accoutrements, nor among the banners waving in war poems. Obeyesekere proposes another origin, “that the rampant lion with the sword—a grotesque, violent and sexualized figure—constituted the Coat of Arms...of the Dutch republic.... The Sinhala people, however, creatively transformed the rampant Dutch lion...by superimposing on it a traditional form of the stylized Sinhala lion” (240-41). Thus the lion flag was not an ancient Lankan tradition, or

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<sup>15</sup> Roberts 2004.

even a more recent Kandyan one, but rather a European style adopted in some maritime provinces. The British then selected this banner to stand for a “national flag,” one to be replaced during a ceremony in which it was lowered so the Union Jack could be hoisted.

Obeyesekere thereby unseats modern debates on the national flag. Demands that the lion consume more space to represent a Sinhala majority, or that the lion be the *only* thing on the flag, seem misguided in light of this colonial lion-flag legacy. Throughout *The Doomed King*, Obeyesekere uncovers these ironies of colonial history that still affect Sri Lankan memory. His requiem for ill-fated royalty is meant as an antidote for taking inherited versions of the past too seriously. This replaying provides a new myth model for Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha, replacing the villainous violent tyrant with a complex political expert, one who made the best moves available to him to defend his kingdom, even as he fell to conditions beyond his awareness or control. The king never losing his dignity forms a bittersweet finale to the requiem—a genre another anthropologist called “neither hopeless nor hopeful.”<sup>16</sup> So Obeyesekere’s closing scene is the sea voyage into exile, with Śrī Vikrama interviewed by a sympathetic Briton. The king was measured and thoughtful, solemn without regret or despair, becoming his own exemplary myth model for how to emote equipoise in uncertain times.

### More Measures

I conclude with an offering to Professor Obeyesekere, found in archival research at the Colombo National Museum Library. In the spirit of the many translations included in *The Doomed King*, I hope this might supplement the book in some small way, a lost movement to the requiem. It consists of two pieces of anonymous folk poetry, from a 1933 volume of verses collected in Sabaragamuwa. The fact that these came from Æhælēpoḷa’s territory, but are sympathetic to Śrī Vikrama, supports Obeyesekere’s assertion that public dissent against the king was exaggerated. These verses, however, also modify Obeyesekere’s timeline about the memory of Śrī Vikrama. They suggest that the myth model of the tyrant was not the only one at large in the early-twentieth

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<sup>16</sup> Povinelli 2016: 29.

century. Within the burgeoning independence movement, in which Sinhala poetry was a key rhetorical medium, Śrī Vikrama also filled the role of an unjustly deposed native ruler. Obeyesekere did note early in his book that renowned Buddhist modernizer Anagarika Dharmapala “was one of the very few in the twentieth century who defended Sri Vikrama” (15). These poems suggest it was perhaps not *so* very few. The final verses of the second poem were even printed in a 1934 literary magazine with nationalist themes.<sup>17</sup>

These poems also indicate where Obeyesekere might have gone further in *The Doomed King*. Considering his earlier work on *karma*, that concept would have been a welcome emic instrument of analysis.<sup>18</sup> While Obeyesekere presents a detailed picture of royal ideals and the cosmology supporting them, more remains to be said about how this worldview spun differently with the infusion of colonial interference. What did Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha’s deposition have to do with *karma*, or even the alignment of the planets? The verses below show some of these larger conditions beyond the strong-arms of European empire, including the king’s past lives and unfortunate astrology.<sup>19</sup>

Astrologically, these poets made great use of solar metaphor. All Sri Lankan kings were of the solar lineage (*sūriya vaṃsa*), as elegized for Śrī Vikrama in *Imgrīsi Haṭana*. So when the king sailed for exile in India, he was a sun setting in the west, gazing back to the island and its Buddhist landmarks, including the Dalada temple of the tooth relic, and Sumana Mountain with its footprint relic. The first poet, however, had the royal sun not only setting, but eclipsed entirely by approaching Rāhu—an *asura*, or “titan,” and an inauspicious planet who swallows sun and moon.<sup>20</sup> If the solar lineage seems extinguished in the darkness of Rāhu, dimmed like the royal body stripped of gold, the quiet confidence that the king still carries in the last lines of the second poem echoes the finale of *The Doomed King*, rekindling a new myth for Śrī

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<sup>17</sup> n.a. 1934. Colombo National Museum Library call number 104/BB2.

<sup>18</sup> On *karma* in political history, see: Walters 2003.

<sup>19</sup> That these poets’ statements on merit and *karma* are somewhat ambiguous fits Obeyesekere’s observation elsewhere that the quandaries of *karma* “in many instances *cannot* be resolved.” Obeyesekere 2002a: 135.

<sup>20</sup> See *Candimā Sutta* and *Suriya Sutta* in *Samyutta Nikāya* (2000: pp.144-6).

Vikrama in the embers of his indefatigable dignity. After all, even Rāhu's myths have the potential for new dawns after his eclipses. He was once said to have descended into our planet, to dig up fresh soil and cover the primordial ocean of a new world:

Atop the water, the soil layer placed well.  
Creating the soil layer called the earth.  
Poisons removed, atop the water it was placed well.  
The universe's first-coming on that day is born.<sup>21</sup>

After the inauspicious eclipse of colonial history, Obeyesekere has shed light on alternate pasts and presents. His requiem is played to remove poisons of prior biases, and lay new grounds for scholarship. I hope these verses may add a bit more earth to this endeavor.

### **The Capture of Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha<sup>22</sup>**

Diverse weapons taken, the army crossed over through various river  
ports and looked.  
Having gone to Senkaḍagalpura, and not seeing that king as they  
thought at first,  
they left from there, went in an instant, and surrounded Teldeniya.  
Both merit and demerit ready at hand, the king was taken and made to  
leave.

Roughly, as though the delicate royal body had entered Rāhu,  
gold ornaments worth thousands disappeared like his own people.  
This great one was touched on the hair as if by strong tuskers.  
Those sufferings in the amount of thousands, unable to speak like this.

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<sup>21</sup> *Mæṇikpāla Sāntiya* f.3a, v.2. Or.6615(366) in Somadasa 1987-1995.

<sup>22</sup> The editors of the collection gave the following description: "Regarding the manner of the army that left Colombo and journeyed to Kandy for the capture of King Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha, and the manner of catching the king while at Teldeniya, a collection of *rasafu* poetry was composed by a poet who saw it with his own eyes, which we received from Kiriællē Epiṭavala Sudarśana Valavvē W. K. Raṇsimha Baṇḍāra Mahatmayā. For that composition quoted below, we think there may be some additional verses." (Guṇadās and Appuhāmi 1933: 46). Colombo National Museum Library call number 104/Z15.

Brutish rough ignorant ministers, having gathered for pleasure,  
giving to eat, bringing this about, they sat at the spot.  
Who is a person to assist the captured king?  
Turning to go from the country, away like the western sun.

[The city] a floating hillock, like a water bubble rising atop the sea,  
existing for an eon, bound in good household groves.  
Recalling the god who gives it all without any meagerness,  
the Lankan King was in Colombo for a few days.

Place after place, to secret towns having been drawn in due turns.  
Having separated away, the manner of royal wealth and glory hidden.  
Without even a piece of that, took only these shilling coins.  
Then, to go to the foreign country, the king boarded the ocean vessel.

### **The Exile of Śrī Vikrama Rājasimha<sup>23</sup>**

Spread gem-light rays decorating the ten directions,  
With the Dalada Temple golden pinnacle in the womb of the sky.  
Great relic-shrine steeple shining, gold pinnacle coils in clusters,  
Clearly visible still to me in the northern region.

The good-to-hear Sage Lord's attractive sacred foot;  
possessed of it, Sumana Mountain in the east brightly shining.  
In the gorgeous region beyond appears Attanagalla,  
With Kæḷaniya visible, and also coconut tree verdure.

I am born in your womb, fully beautiful like this.  
I bear the crown, experiencing all royal glory.  
I guard your groups of children, breaking enemies.  
I turn today sorrowfully from you, Reverend Mother Lanka.

Various sufferings comfortably enduring with gentle virtue.  
Not only that, works having built for the great populace.  
With the name Siri Vikman, your young son,  
today is a suffering prisoner, oh greatest pity!

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<sup>23</sup> This poem was written in the voice of the king looking back on Lanka. The editors of the collection guessed it was composed not long before 1933. See *ibid*: 47.

From fear of hell, I had not taken alcohol.  
Cunningly caused to drink, again I have taken it happily.  
The young prince who bears the demerits tomorrow,  
was severed because the country fell to enemies.

But not being one who heeds my law,  
the minister Æhælēpoḷa caused fear.  
*Jāti*, country, and creed, to sit on the lion-throne,  
were offered to the now-joyful English *jāti*.

I did not cause a single fault for my brothers.  
I supported various places in the country for development.  
I endured great suffering, and thus like this, departed.  
Alas! How do I console my naive separated women?

Æhælēpoḷa's cheating words without end,  
The Sinhala nobles having trusted lovingly,  
The huge Sinhala royal line destroyed and discarded.  
In Sinhala now is there even the water of Mother Sri Lanka?

For two-thousand years we happily existed.  
Today the crown of freedom is owned by other people.  
Because of anger, the doubt of one's own people.  
They destroyed that freedom, the Sinhala *jāti*.

Mother Sri Lanka continually bearing glory,  
I bow, recalling your great virtue always.  
Though royal *karma* was done, by done *karma* fruits,  
this much suffering occurred; my past enduring.

Alas, the thick darkness today in the eastern jewel!  
The *hohō* roar is known in the heart but in bits.  
The family circle is brought into this suffering.  
Yet somehow I experience it happily and without doubt.

While courageous Sinhala lineages are put to memory,  
While the bit of my noble royal blood evaporates,  
From the eyes I shed no tears while life remains.  
So live long! Reverend Mother Lanka.

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