GALACTIC POLITIES AND THE DECENTRALISATION OF ADMINISTRATION IN SRI LANKA
The Buddha Does Not Always Have to Return to the Centre

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The postcolonial ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka is a crisis of the postcolonial state, a state which has been unable to break away from the mirror of the centralised British colonial state. Like most postcolonial polities in South and Southeast Asia, a dominant feature of the Sri Lankan state is its highly personalised patron–clientalist nature. Far from been neutral and restricted in its performative capacity by the liberal restrictions of the rule of law, the postcolonial state in Sri Lanka has characterised itself by its capacity to capture and transform the social and cultural domain. Consequently, the dynamics of the state have become thoroughly embedded in the social and cultural life of the Sinhala, predominantly Buddhist, majority. Given the hierarchical nature of these practices, which are very much cosmologically ordained by the form of Buddhism that has come to dominate Sinhala life, the state too, in its everyday practices — be they legal, economic or social — has become motivated by this hierarchical logic. It is this hierarchical dynamic which has inhibited the state from devising administrative techniques which would answer the desire from the minority communities for a devolution of power from the centre. While the state articulates at an ontological level the hierarchical and encompassing dynamic of the Buddhist cosmos, the precolonial galactic polities of Sri Lanka encapsulated, in terms of both their geographical and administrative organisation, the non-hierarchical and diffusive dynamic of the Buddhist cosmos. This dynamic has been consistently repressed in the discourse of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism.

> … all human interpretations of events are constructions and … it is the principles that underlie the constructions, and the social and political significances they are made to bear, that are the major concern of … analysis.[1]

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1 Kapferer (1997), p xiv.

Introduction

The argument I develop here places Buddhism and its attendant cosmological structure at the centre. My objective is to develop a Buddhist argument in favour of the decentralisation of administrative power in Sri Lanka. The argument is twofold: to challenge the limits of Orientalist-inspired arguments which have maintained that identity formation in Sri Lanka was essentially a product of the discursive practices of the mature colonial state in the late nineteenth century; and to identify the significance of precolonial markers of identity as constituting their own discursive framework against which both inclusive and exclusive dynamics of identity formation were to take place.[2] The argument will analyse the spatial metaphors present in the Pali chronicles, which were initiated two thousand years ago, with a view to discerning the administrative practices of the precolonial, particularly pre-British, Buddhist polities.[3] While these metaphors are contradictory, giving effect to both centralising and decentralising dynamics depending on the contingency of cosmic time and space, the argument I develop stresses the inherently fissiparous nature of bureaucratic forms once these metaphors were actualised within the contingency of historical time and space.

'Cosmic time' is a reference to the Buddhist cosmos and what, in the light of Bruce Kapferer's seminal work on the structural logics of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism, I shall characterise as an ontological force which orients the organisational dynamics of the precolonial polities in Sri Lanka.[4] The Buddhist cosmos is hierarchical too, but its structure remains in a terminal state of flux, in a continuous movement between order and disorder. The disordering aspect of the cosmos gave legitimacy to the decentralised administrative practices of the precolonial polities, but in the postcolonial period, the countervailing drive towards order has been unduly privileged as

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2 Sri Lanka underwent five centuries of European colonial rule from the early sixteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive and they had a profound impact on the coastal parts of the island. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Dutch naval power was successful in evicting the Portuguese and by the end of the eighteenth century, the island was brought within the jurisdiction of the British Crown. While the Portuguese and the Dutch were never able to secure control of the whole of the island, the central highlands around the Kandyan Kingdom remaining relatively autonomous of the European-controlled coastal lands, all this was to change with the arrival of the British in 1796. By 1815, the Kandyan Kingdom under the last of the South Indian Nayakkar monarchs, Sri Vickrama Rajasimha, had capitulated to the British.

3 Pali, a classical Indian language derived from Sanskrit, is the sacred script of Theravada Buddhism. Theravada means 'Doctrine of the Elders', a reference to the senior monks (*bhikkus*) who preserve tradition. Theravada came to Sri Lanka in 250 BCE (circa) from North India where the Buddha had preached the dhamma, the Buddhist Doctrine, which, because it both describes and prescribes, is both 'Truth' and 'Law'. See Gombrich (1988), pp 1–3.

4 See Kapferer (1988 [1998]), pp 19–20.

lending Buddhist legitimacy towards the unitary state bequeathed by the British. Here I privilege Buddhist cosmic disorder as the basis from which the postcolonial Sinhalese Buddhist state can begin the process of reinventing itself as a Buddhist state which, like its pre-British ancestors, is both incorporative of diversity and essentially non-hierarchical in administrative form. Let me first set the context of my argument.

Setting the Scene

With the arrival of the British, for the first time in the island's 2000-year history, the territory of the island came under the authority of a single sovereign power, the Crown. This is a tale of the traumatic history of the island that has ensued since the British unified the island under a single authority and began the process of establishing the forms of government that were associated with a unified sovereignty in Colombo. With unification came the effacement of a history of Hindu-Buddhist administrative practices that were much more diffused and anti-centralising in their dynamics. It is these dynamics, with their public law import for contemporary debates about federalism and unitarianism, that I will focus on here.

The effacement of these older bureaucratic practices was given added impetus by the rise of an increasingly governmental colonial state from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, which began the process of actively reconstituting not only Sinhalese Buddhist history but also the identity of the Sinhalese people and the identity of the various minority communities in relation to the Sinhalese Buddhist majority. The emergence of a colonial historiography of the island became intimately connected to strategies of colonial legitimation with emerging indigenous elites amongst the various communities.[5]

The process of colonial state formation was — as in any colonial context — disjunctive as the state articulated different modalities of power and rationality, some sovereign and some governmental. The transition from a state model which relied on the force of sovereignty in the interests of mercantile territorial expansion to one in which the rationality of the colonial state became directed to the social conditions of life on the island is one which David Scott has documented.[6] I would agree with Scott that the transition to the latter modality of power is of greater significance because it allows for a critical inquiry into the manner in which the insertion of European institutions into the colonial scene 'constructed and organised' the lives of the colonised.[7] This process was critical to the emergence of a highly racialised taxonomy of Sri Lanka's many ethnic groups. It also set the scene for the contestation for the institutions of the postcolonial state after 1948. While, at an institutional level, ethnic cleavages between the Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers had begun to reveal themselves in the 1930s, it was in the post-1956 period, less than 10 years after independence, that an inherently Sinhalese Buddhist

5 See Jeganathan (1995), pp 112–17.

6 See Scott (1999), pp 23–52.

7 Scott (1999), p 26.

state began to take shape.[8] The cultural capital for this project had been provided by the Sinhalese Buddhist revivalist movement of the late nineteenth century. In turn, the revivalist movement had circumscribed itself within a colonial historiography that projected Victorian notions of 'race' to the people described in the Pali chronicles.

The Pali chronicles, such as the *Dipavamsa* (the Little Chronicle) and the *Mahavamsa* (the Great Chronicle), which record the relationship between the pre-colonial kings of Sri Lanka and Buddhism from the fifth to the twelfth centuries, were subjected to rigorous textual analysis, with a view to ascertaining their truth value.[9] In time, the privileging of racial categories became contemporaneous with the colonial and nationalist task of restoring 'ancient' and 'sacred' Buddhist sites.[10] The racialising of Sinhalese nationalist categories had a significant epistemic impact on the Buddhist revivalist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[11] While the period between the end of the nineteenth century and the late 1930s is characterised by the contestation for cultural capital between the narrower sectional nationalism of the Sinhalese and the Tamils, and a much more all-encompassing 'Ceylonese nationalism', the period after independence is marked by the inevitable triumph of a highly fetishised Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism.[12]

The idiom of Sinhalese Buddhist ethnicity was to have a profound and 'overdetermining impact on political structures'[13] in post-1948 Sri Lanka.

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8 As far as the current ethnic composition of the island is concerned, according to the 1981 census the Sinhalese comprised 74 per cent and the Tamils comprised 18.2 per cent, but the Tamils were divided into two distinct components, one 'indigenous' and one 'migrant' — so-called 'Indian Tamils'. The Tamil plantation workers who were introduced to the island between 1852 and the 1930s were classified as 'Indian Tamils' in order to divide them from the 'Ceylon Tamils' — who (like the majority Sinhalese community) could claim long-term genealogical descent on the island. The Muslims who are descendents of both Arab traders and Tamil Hindu and possibly Sinhalese Buddhist converts to Islam comprised 7.1 per cent according to the 1981 census. According to the same census, the Burghers (descendants of Portuguese, Dutch, German, Swiss, Italian and British settler communities) and Eurasians comprised 0.3 per cent, while the Malays (descendents of both Malay and Javanese soldiers and prisoners introduced by the Dutch from their possessions in the East Indies) comprised 0.3 per cent. The Veddhas (the indigenous inhabitants of the island) and other ethnic groups comprised 0.2 per cent.

9 See Kemper (1991), pp 53–78. The Buddhist '*vamsa*' literature has its genealogical roots in the Indian Hindu tradition. The *Mahavamsa* was probably composed between the fifth and the sixth centuries by the monk Mahanama and is based on the earlier *Dipavamsa*, but the events recorded in the *Dipavamsa* are given greater length in the *Mahavamsa*; however, as Kemper (1991), pp 39–40 notes, the 'additional material comes from popular material that Mahanama adds to enlarge the account of the origins of the Sinhalas'.

10 See Kemper (1991), pp 139, 159.

11 See Obeyesekere (1997), pp 355–84.

12 See Roberts (1997b), pp 439–60.

13 See Uyangoda (1996), p 31.

Undoubtedly the construction of a highly essentialised and fetishised Sinhalese Buddhist ethnicity by the British colonial state out of much more diverse precolonial markers of identity has similarly had an overdetermining effect on postcolonial legal forms in Sri Lanka.[14] It is to these precolonial, specifically pre-British, markers of identity that I now turn, in part with a view towards suggesting a way out of the dead end of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and its attendant state forms.

Beyond Post-Orientalism

While I still firmly believe in the intellectual coherence of much of the post-Orientalist project (of which David Scott would undoubtedly be a part), which has sought to demonstrate how much of the ethno-religious conflicts in many parts of Asia and the Middle East have been the result of the organisational and conceptual tools of the European colonial state and political philosophy respectively, I am also increasingly convinced — like Michael Roberts, HL Seneviratne and Bruce Kapferer, for example — that critical scholarship has to be attuned to the problem of agency in much of this literature.[15] As Roberts notes, there is a tendency in this body of literature to 'cast the colonial people as passive recipients' of European ideas, which as a consequence tends to limit the significance of indigenous knowledge.[16]

The argument I develop is one informed by the manner in which 'Asokan notions of pontifical power, informs the practices' of not only ancient and contemporary Sinhalese political leaders, but also of constitutional rhetoric and practice throughout most of Sri Lanka's recent history.[17]

The Nayakkar Kings had acceded to the Kandyan throne in 1739. Although they were Tamil and Hindu, they continued to oversee a Buddhist renaissance, which had been initiated in the early seventeenth century.[18] The intimate relationship between the monarchy, state and Buddhism that the Nayakkar kings continued to foster was consistent with the forms that the legitimation of Buddhist kingship had historically taken. Stanley Tambiah, in his seminal work on the vicissitudes of Thai Buddhist kingship in its historical relation, has argued that early Buddhism forged a model of polity that 'yoked religion (*sasana*) and its specialised salvation seekers, the monks in their collective identity as *sangha*, with a socio-political order of which kingship was the articulating principle'.[19] While this model of kingship and polity was

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14 See Kapferer (1998), pp 93–99; Roberts (1997a), pp 25–26.

15 As an example of this type of scholarship on Sri Lanka, see Spencer (1990), which throughout stresses the highly constructed nature of Sinhalese Buddhist identity against the background of social, political and cultural transformation by the British colonial state.

16 Roberts (1997), p 25.

17 Roberts (1997), p 25. It is important to emphasise that this paradigm 'does not purport to describe the Emperor Asoka's rule over the Mauryan Empire in India in the third century BC': Roberts (1994), p 57.

18 See Seneviratne (1978), pp 177–87.

19 Tambiah (1976), p 5.

to inform the history of Thai state formation from the 'twelfth century to the present day',[20] it similarly informed the organisational dynamics of the precolonial Sinhalese polities as well.[21] What I want to stress is how these organisational processes were oriented by cosmological dynamics which, although hierarchical in essence, gave way to highly decentralised forms of administration in substance. In effect, I want to argue in favour of a Buddhist justification for the devolution of power from the centre in Colombo in the context of postcolonial debates about the nature of the state in Sri Lanka.

Contra the Orientalist tradition, Richard Young, James Duncan, John Clifford Holt, Bruce Kapferer, Michael Roberts, and HL Seneviratne have to varying degrees stressed the significance of Buddhist oral traditions, Buddhist architectural traditions, Hindu-Buddhist cosmological processes and the transmission of Buddhist ideas through mural painting and palm leaf inscriptions as constituting a precolonial epistemic foundation against which dynamic processes of polity organisation, ritual practice and processes of othering were also to take place.[22]

It is these cosmological processes that I will focus on. As a rhetorical strategy, nationalism embodies the mythic. It is a domain of discourse and practice which combines the esoteric and the magical (or phantasmatic in a more psychoanalytical vein, as something which always struggles to mask over the trauma that is associated with the moment of national foundation or origin) 'with the thoroughgoing energies of practical politics'.[23] It will become evident that the debates surrounding the devolution of power from the centre in Colombo, in terms of both its linguistic structure and the cultural resources it draws on for its ontological force, constitutes one such realm of practical politics.[24]

The mythic accounts of precolonial Sri Lankan history as recorded in the *Mahavamsa* are integral to the everyday life of the Sinhalese Buddhists by virtue of the extent to which debates about ancient Sinhalese kings, and Buddhist sacred places and monuments, circulate as identificatory points of reference at the level of both popular sentiment and political discourse

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20 Tambiah (1976), p 6.

21 See Seneviratne (1978), pp 177–87.

22 See Duncan (1990); Holt (1991); Young and Somaratna (1996); Seneviratne (1976).

23 Kapferer (1998), p xv. Appropriating the work of the Lacanian cultural psychoanalyst Slavoj Zizek, I have elsewhere suggested that psychoanalysis provides a conceptual framework for discerning the play of phantasies which motivates at an unconscious level the dynamic and often contradictory structure of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist rhetoric, which on the one hand asserts that the Tamil other is 'hardworking' and on the other hand 'steals our jobs'. See de Silva Wijeyeratne (1998), pp 37–67; Obeyesekere (1997), pp 368–75.

24 See Kapferer (1998), pp xviii–xix. It is in terms of that which remains *hidden* that Kapferer attributes to the Sinhalese Buddhist cosmos the status of an ontological horizon, an anterior presence whose hierarchical logic reveals its force in the mythic life of the Sinhalese Buddhist nation as well as in the ritual life of Sinhalese Buddhists.

amongst the Sinhalese Buddhist elites.[25] In addition, they are of much significance at a metaphorical level to the ritual life of Sinhalese Buddhists and so are fundamentally embedded within the everyday practices of Sinhalese Buddhists, be they agents caught up in the rituals of an exorcism or in the highly destructive practices of Sinhalese nationalist violence.[26] It is the cosmology of Sinhalese Buddhism that motivates the structural logic of the socio-cultural practices of nation and law in Sri Lanka, and it is to those practices that I now turn. Before doing so, however, I will first present an account of the historical context of the devolution debate in Sri Lanka.

Contextualising Devolution

In the aftermath of the *Official Language Act 1956*, by which Sinhala became the official language of the island, the demands of the Tamil Federal Party for administrative decentralisation steadily increased.[27] Attempts at devolution in the 1950s and 1960s failed due to both the opposition of Sinhalese nationalists who articulated Sinhalese fears of a fragmentation of the Sinhalese Buddhist nation, and a general reluctance on the part of the political centre to contemplate a meaningful devolution of power.[28] As a consequence, Tamil politics began to take on an increasingly militant and separatist tone. In the period between 1970 and 1977 under Mrs Bandaranaike's SLFP-led United Front coalition government (which included the Trotskyite-oriented Lanka Sama Samaj Party and the Marxist-oriented Communist Party), no attempt at devolution was made. The Left was particularly hostile to devolution on the grounds that it would act as a countervailing force to the project of centralising ownership of the means of production.

The 1972 Republican Constitution marked the triumph of Sinhalese linguistic nationalism when the status of Sinhala as the official language of the state received constitutional protection.[29] The SLFP component of this government was particularly hostile to the political claims of the Tamil community. In the field of education, for example, they pursued policies that inevitably forced Tamil politics into an increasingly separatist direction.[30] Consequently, by 1976 the Federal Party and other Tamil political parties had reconstituted themselves as the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF), which for the first time nominally committed itself to the establishment of a separate state.[31] While the presence of the Left in this government, according to Pieter

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25 See Walters (1995), pp 25–54; see also Kemper (1991), pp 105–34, 161–93. The *Mahavamsa*, for example, records the cosmogenesis of the Sinhala people out of a union between a woman and a being who is half man and half lion, the foundation of the Sinhala polity by Prince Vijaya, and its fragmentation and heroic rebirth under King Dutugemunu in the third century BCE.

26 See Kapferer (1997), p 292.

27 See de Silva (1986), pp 210–11.

28 See de Silva (1986), pp 191–92; see also Jeyaratnam Wilson (1988), p 124.

29 See de Silva (1986), p 240.

30 See de Silva (1978), pp 85–123; see also Tambiah (1992), pp 66–70.

31 See de Silva (1986), pp 257–61.

Keuneman, acted as a counter to the anti-Tamil instincts of the SLFP, in terms of dealing with the national question, the Left failed to adequately defend the interests of the Tamil minority.[32]

Between 1975 and 1977, first the Lanka Sama Samaj Party and then the Communist Party split from the coalition over policy differences, and in the subsequent general election of July 1977 the conservative United National Party, led by the anti-devolutionist JR Jayawardena, won a landslide victory. The nominally separatist TULF became the official opposition. On coming into power, the new government introduced a highly centralising constitution based on an executive presidency that combined the French Gaullist system of the French Fifth Republic with the Westminster Parliamentary model.

Between 1978 and 1987, eight attempts were made to find a solution to Sri Lanka's deepening ethnic crisis. By 1983, a fully fledged civil war had broken out between the Sinhalese-dominated state and the Tamil-dominated periphery of the north and the east. Against this background, numerous devolution packages failed to bridge the growing enmity between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. The root cause of this failure in this period was the manner in which by the end of the 1970s the bureaucratic machinery of the Sinhalese state had been systematically transformed to reflect the ideological commitments of a highly fetishised Buddhist religiosity and national sentiment. The more 'Sinhalese Buddhist' the state became, the weaker it became in terms of its capacity to project its legitimacy in the Tamil-dominated areas of the north and the east.

Neelan Tiruchelvam has observed that the unitary state 'has influenced the outlook of the bureaucracy ... in the resolution of centre-provincial disputes'.[33] In addition, the executive presidency instituted in 1978 'inevitably led to a concentration of power and authority in the centre, and constrained the meaningful devolution of power to the provinces'.[34] The only conclusion to be drawn from this failure was the general reluctance on the part of a highly Sinhalised bureaucracy and state to implement devolution from the centre. Since the late 1950s, attempts at devolution have failed because whichever party was in opposition was able to mobilise Sinhalese Buddhist sentiment against the devolution of power by constructing such a move as inherently destructive of Buddhist interests on the island. Similar claims have been made against the current government led by Ranil Wickremesinghe as it grapples with the uncompromising instincts of a small but highly vocal minority in the Buddhist Sangha.

In July 1987, in the face of pressure from the Indian government, the government of JR Jayawardena signed the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord.[35] Under the terms of the Accord, Provincial Councils were to be established on the basis of the existing delimitation of the island into nine provinces. On the

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32 Pieter Keuneman, interview recorded in Colombo, Sri Lanka, 15 December 1990.

33 Tiruchelvam (1996), p 36.

34 Tiruchelvam (1996), pp 37, 40.

35 See Marasinghe (1988), pp 572–81.

basis of earlier negotiations, it was understood that they would have the same powers as a state in the quasi-federal Indian Union.[36]

In addition, the Accord declared that Sri Lanka was a 'multi-ethnic and multi-lingual plural society', and that the different ethnic groups had a 'distinct cultural and linguistic identity' which had to be protected. Most controversially, the Accord stated that 'the northern and eastern provinces have been areas of historical habitation of the Sri Lankan Tamil-speaking peoples', while at the same time sharing 'this territory with other ethnic groups'.[37] Consequently, under Article 2.1 of the Accord, the northern and eastern provinces were to be unified under a single Provincial Council, but this unification was to be subject to a referendum (which, writing in 2003, has yet to take place) for the people of the eastern province to decide whether or not they desired to stay united with the northern province.[38]

The Ontological Limits of Devolution

What was striking about the nature of the opposition to this devolutionary strategy was the way it invoked a mythic terrain, a terrain associated with the mythological trajectory of Sinhalese Buddhism. Opposition to the 1987 Indo-Sri Lankan Accord was led by the SLFP, the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (Buddhist United Front — MEP) and the Mavbima Surakime Vyaparaya (the Movement for the Protection of the Motherland — MSV), as well as Sinhalese nationalists within the ruling UNP government. They both portrayed these measures as tantamount to the dismemberment and division of Sri Lanka, the *dhammadipa*, the island of the *dhamma*, which in the contemporary period could only be ensured through a unitary state.[39] This conception of *dhammadipa* and Sihadipa (island of the *dhamma* and island of the Sinhala people) was first enshrined in the *Dipavamsa* and the *Mahavamsa*, in which we are told that the Buddha not only tames the demons (*yakhas*) and restores stability to the cosmos, but also — as a reward for this — claims the island for Buddhism.

The paradigm of *dhammadipa* is first articulated in the Pali chronicles. They stress two dominant themes: first, that the Buddha consecrates and purifies the island in order that the island realise 'his vision of it as the sanctuary of the true (that is, Theravada) *dhamma*; and second, the exemplification of 'the means by which the dhamma is to be maintained and edified'.[40] In doing so, the author of the *Mahavamsa* is trying to instruct its readers, kings and laity on the ideal 'relations between king and *sangha* which will preserve the purity of the *dhammadipa*.'[41] Much of the *Mahavamsa* is

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36 See Tambiah (1992), p 77.

37 Cited by Tambiah (1992), pp 76–77.

38 A referendum was politically necessary because a third of the population in the Eastern Province is Muslim.

39 See Tambiah (1992), pp 85–88.

40 Clifford (1978), p 39.

41 Clifford (1978), p 37. The *Mahavamsa* was authored by the monk Mahanama in the sixth century CE. He was a monk of the Mahavihara *sangha*, which since the

devoted to a delimitation of the ideal Buddhist king — that is, one who protects the *sangha*, and who honours the Buddha by building *vihares* (temples) and *stupas* (domed structures which occasionally house relics of the Buddha). The ideal Buddhist state 'exists for the protection and promotion of the *dhamma*, functioning in a way parallel to the *sangha* in the spiritual realm.'[42] According to the *Mahavamsa*, the ideal Buddhist kings 'ruled Lanka with precisely this crucial understanding of the purpose of the state', and this set them apart those monarchs who did not rule with this purpose in mind.[43]

The authors of the *Dipavamsa* narrate how the Buddha prepares the island for the entry of the *dhamma*. He pacifies the island by peaceful means by relocating the Yakkhas, supernatural beings who ate other humans, to another island. The Buddha achieves his goal by compassionate means.[44] King Devanampiyatissa, who not only receives the dhamma from the Emperor Asoka, but also rules through peaceful means, exemplifies his example. The *Mahavamsa*, however, recounts this story by stressing how the Buddha's power instils fear into the Yakkhas, and how he subsequently expels them. There is no reference to the compassionate means employed by the Buddha; instead, the Buddha 'sets a violent precedent'.[45] It is this precedent which is actualised in the biography of King Dutthagamani, the great Sinhala warrior monarch who disobeys his father and kills the Tamil King Elara and in doing so restores Buddhist kingship to the first of the Sinhala polities centred around Anuradhapura in the second century. Dutthagamani's violent journey is legitimated by the Buddha's own violence in the *Mahavamsa*'s account of his pacification of the island. Dutthagamani atones for his violence by building *viharas* and *stupas* for the *sangha*, but a significant and dominant trope is now established — namely the legitimation if violence in defence of the *dhamma* and legitimate destruction of the Tamil Other who stands outside the *dhamma*.[46]

To jump to the present, in the context of twentieth century Sinhalese nationalism this mytho-historical narrative of the *dhammapdipa* and Sihadipa is reconstituted in exclusivist terms as a dominant metaphor against the fragmenting claims of devolution.[47] The Tamil Other, of course, has made these claims from the 1940s onwards. The presence of the Indian Army helped fan those latent fears masterfully articulated by Sinhalese nationalists of 'marauding Tamils invading the island and threatening the unity and sovereignty of a beleaguered but twenty-five-hundred-year-old Sinhala

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inauguration of Buddhism in the island in the third century BCE under the auspices of the greatest of the Indian Buddhist kings, the Emperor Asoka, had been the only authority on the *dhamma* on the island. See Clifford (1978), p 40.

42 Clifford (1978), p 40.

43 Clifford (1978), p 40.

44 Clifford (1978), p 41.

45 Clifford (1978), p 41.

46 Clifford (1978), p 42-43.

47 See Tambiah (1992), p 80; see also Roberts (1994), pp 65–66.

polity'.[48] This invocation of myth as a trope of Sinhalese Buddhist opposition to devolution was first articulated in 1958.

In 1956, Tamil opposition to the *Official Language Act* forced Bandaranaike to adopt a limited form of devolution. What emerged was the Bandaranaike–Chelvanaygam Pact of July 1957. This provided for the Tamil language to be granted the status of an official language for the purpose of administration in the north and the east, for a strengthening of the devolutionary measures of the Regional Councils Bill and for limits to be placed on the number of Sinhalese 'colonists' who were being transferred to the agricultural developments in the northern and eastern provinces, so as to ensure that the indigenous Tamils maintained their majority position in these areas.[49]

Consequently, JR Jayawardene for the opposition United National Party called the Pact a 'betrayal of the Sinhalese'.[50] In order to emphasise its fragmenting effect on the state (and by extension the cosmos), Jayawardene led a procession which included chanting monks 'from Colombo to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy as a pilgrimage to worship and to protest at that shrine, where the relic that served as the palladium of the earlier Sinhalese kingdoms, and by extension, of the modern polity resided'.[51] This was followed by a rally of the opponents of the Pact outside the temple.

Tamils and Tamil-owned shops in Colombo were attacked, and in April one monk declared that the Pact would 'lead to the total annihilation of the Sinhalese race'.[52] Finally, in May 1958, several dozen monks engaged in an organised protest outside Bandaranaike's private residence. Failing to dissuade the monks and take on the extremists, Bandaranaike announced the abrogation of the Pact and in late May there followed a period of systematic anti-Tamil rioting, briefly followed by a Tamil backlash in parts of the north and the east where the Sinhalese were a minority.[53] The juxtaposition of myth and rioting was one that was to continue for much of the period after 1958.

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48 See Tambiah (1992), p 77.

49 The proposal for regional councils reflected Bandaranaike's own personal ambivalence towards the efficacy of the unitary state. Indeed, in the 1920s he had called for the establishment of a federal state. See de Silva (1986), pp 182–87. Under the terms of the Regional Councils Bill, Regional Councils would have had the power to amalgamate with each other, to control the numbers of settlers in the 'colonisation' schemes in the Dry Zone as well as land development and education. See de Silva (1986), pp 187, 191–92. In addition, Tamil was to be recognised as a 'language of Ceylon', while it was to be accorded 'official status' for the purpose of administration in the northern and eastern provinces. See Tambiah (1986), p 73.

50 Cited by Tambiah (1992), p 49.

51 Tambiah (1992), p 49. It is called the Temple of the Tooth because it houses a tooth belonging to the Buddha.

52 Cited by Manor (1989), p 286.

53 See Manor (1989), p 50; Tambiah (1992), pp 51–57. The Bandaranaike–Chelvanaygam Pact was resurrected between 1960 and 1964 under an SLFP government led by Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the widow of Mr Bandaranaike, the Federal Party giving its support to the SLFP in the July 1960 general election on

Contemporary Devolution Proposals

It was against the background of the failure of the Provincial Councils in the North and the East and an intensifying civil war that in August 1994 the People's Alliance came to power. The People's Alliance, led by Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumarathunga, the daughter of Mr and Mrs Bandaranaike, came to power partly on the promise that it would end the Sinhala–Tamil conflict by introducing a scheme for the devolution of power. Under these proposals issued in 1996, Regional Councils were to be established for every province. In addition, the existing boundaries of the present north–east province were to be re-dermarcated with a view to reconciling Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim interests.

Under these constitutional proposals, the encompassing dynamic of the centre (a dominant feature of earlier devolution programs) was subordinated to a diffusionist imperative, which sought to lessen the power of the centre. Characteristic of this imperative, for example, was an intention that the Concurrent List (areas of shared responsibility between the centre and the Provincial Councils) of the existing Provincial Councils be abolished. It recommended that most of the subjects under this list be transferred to the Regional List and instead that a Regional List and a Reserved List be established.[54] Under the Regional List, Regional Councils were to have legislative jurisdiction — for example, over law and order (principally with reference to crime and public order) and the administration of justice.[55] They were also to have legislative jurisdiction over education (including higher education), agriculture, energy, rural development and urban planning, broadcasting and the media, social security, and limited forms of taxation such as betting taxes, stamp duties and vehicle licence fees.

What was striking about these proposals was that they attempted to fundamentally reorder centre–periphery relations in a manner that echoed the power and administrative dynamics of the precolonial polities. What I will do now is compare this echo with the administrative practices of the precolonial

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condition that the terms of the agreement be implemented. But once in power, the SLFP reneged on its pledge under pressure from Sinhalese extremists both in the party and outside. See de Silva (1986), pp 189–90. A further attempt at decentralisation under the national government of the UNP and the FP between 1965 and 1970 also failed. As with the Bandaranaike–Chelvanaygam Pact, in mid-1969 the government was forced to abandon the District Councils Bill (which would not have had the extensive powers of the Regional Councils proposed in the earlier Pact) on the grounds that the opposition SLFP and elements in the UNP led by JR Jayewardene 'played on the well-entrenched suspicion among the Sinhalese that devolution or decentralisation would inevitably pave the way for a fully-fledged federal structure, which in turn would be the precursor of moves for a policy of separation of the Tamil units of such a federation from the Sri Lankan polity': de Silva (1986), p 193.

54 See Tiruchelvam (1996), p 41.

55 Provincial High Courts were established under the Thirteenth Amendment, but to little practical effect.

polities, and then draw some concluding parallels with the present. The point that will be elaborated on is the extent to which the 1996 proposals (proposals which in effect still remain on the table) have been given an ontological potency by virtue of a dynamic relation which these proposals have to the cosmology of Sinhalese Buddhism. Ontology, in the way I articulate this term, is always emergent through historical processes and is not the property of a psyche independent of history. It is always thoroughly temporally contingent.

Ontological Dynamics and the Pre-colonial Polities

The mythic and ritual life of the rural Sinhalese engages a hierarchical dynamic, a dynamic characterised by the movement from order to fragmentation to reordering. So, in the case of an exorcism ritual, 'the myths [on the origins of sorcery] express and are part of a process by which individuals whose bodies are transgressed by ... destructive demonic forces (usually from within their own immediate social world) are enabled to reassert their physical integrity' by re-encompassing those disabling forces at the base of hierarchy.[56]

Under the conditions of nationalist discourse, these dynamics which are concerned with the reordering of the patient possess the potential to be expanded into the discourse of nation, identity and law. Ontological dynamics which are relevant to the myths in the context of an exorcism ritual are given new meaning within the context of nationalist discourse. The articulation of Sinhalese and Tamil identity has been given new direction within an ontological dynamic that has been abstracted from the confines of ritual, religious and mytho-historical space.

The logic of nationalist practice has 'ontological dimensions'[57] — that is, the practice of nationalism possesses certain dynamics which are relevant to the way in which human beings, within their historical worlds, are existentially constituted. This is only to argue that the being of the myths bears a connection with an ontology of being as this is constituted and reconstituted in the social world of the everyday. This is not to say that their meaning is identical, but rather that the myths have a logical connection with ontologies of being in daily and routine realities.

My concern is with an ontological dynamic which for the most part does not show itself, a pre-conscious dynamic which reveals its force through 'its engagement in specific historical action whereby certain possibilities of the "logic" of ontology achieve significance and derive their potency'.[58] While such an ontological dynamic then remains prior to conscious reflection, it does belong to that which reveals itself. Its force is such that social action in the context of nationalist practice becomes driven by an ontological dynamic which becomes its 'only truth'.[59]

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56 Kapferer (1998), p xx.

57 Kapferer (1998), p 19.

58 Kapferer (1998), p 221, n 5.

59 Kapferer (1998), p 20.

The cosmology of Buddhism constitutes the 'fundamental principles of a being in the world and the orientation of such a being toward the horizons of its experience'.[60] It follows that the meaning of this ontological horizon is already before us in a certain pre-subjective relation.[61] On the one hand, nationalism gains its force in 'the historically and politically framed contexts of a cultural world'.[62] On the other hand, its force is strengthened 'through the logics that are inscribed in its traditions and by the nature of their connection and transformation of the ontologies of the everyday world in which those captured in nationalism must live'.[63] The point I make is that the debates on devolution are a pertinent moment within the nationalist lexicon, which provides meaning to the Buddhist cosmos as an ontological force.

The Sinhalese Buddhist cosmos is hierarchical in that it places knowledge of the *dhamma* in an encompassing relation to political power. The cosmos is multilayered and encompassing, with the Buddha at the apex. Below the Buddha are the guardian deities of the island and below them the lesser deities and finally, below them, disordering demonic spirits.[64] The structure of this hierarchy is not fixed but is instead 'one of progressive encompassment and transformation',[65] or one of 'polytheistic centripetality', the 'worship of several gods, each with its specific attributes and domains, who are subsumed within a scheme which subjects them to a single head' — the Buddha.[66] Good and evil, far from occupying absolute positions within this cosmos, are 'moments in a cosmic process subject to refractions in its structured hierarchy, with progressive fragmentation or progressive re-ordering'.[67] Consequently, the cosmos is in a state of ongoing flux, characterised by the flow of 'supernaturals from higher levels of structure to lower levels and back again',[68] with the Buddha ultimately encompassing the lower layers of the cosmos.

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60 Kapferer (1998), p 79.

61 For Heidegger, phenomenology was not so much concerned with the evident or the manifest, but with the *hidden* or the concealed that the pre-subjective announces. The domain of phenomenology is the Being that, for Heidegger, 'for the most part does *not* show itself at all: it is something that lies *hidden*, in contrast to that which proximally and for the most part does show itself.' Heidegger (1962), p 59, his emphasis. But, paradoxically, 'at the same time it is something that belongs to what thus shows itself': Heidegger (1962), p 59. It is in terms of that which remains *hidden* which Kapferer attributes to the Sinhalese Buddhist cosmos the status of an ontological horizon, an anterior presence whose hierarchical logic reveals its force in the mythic life of the Sinhalese Buddhist nation as well as in the ritual life of Sinhalese Buddhists.

62 Kapferer (1998), p 20.

63 Kapferer (1998), p 20.

64 Kapferer (1998), p 63.

65 Kapferer (1998), p 11.

66 Roberts (1994), p 62.

67 Roberts (1994), p 64.

68 Kapferer (1998), p 173.

It is these cosmological principles of flux which are inscribed in the Asokan Persona and the practice of Sinhala Buddhist kingship, and which give meaning to the organisational dynamics of the precolonial polities.[69] But the *Mahavamsa*, which was composed in the sixth century, imposed 'on the Sri Lankan past a single and continuous point of view that is Sinhala and Theravada Buddhist'.[70] While the Buddhist cosmos (with its dominant metaphors of unity, fragmentation and reordering) as an ontological force is inscribed in the performative dynamic of the *Mahavamsa*, it is the hierarchical aspect (as opposed to the transformative aspect) of encompassment that begins to exert a certain dominance in nationalist discourse (in the late colonial and postcolonial period). It does this by reference to those tropes in texts such as the *Mahavamsa* which emphasise the 'interrelated and overlapping concepts of *dhammadipa* and Sihadipa'.[71]

It is this narrative that orients the postcolonial debates on devolution. In making a claim for the devolution of administrative power, the Tamil Other threatens to fragment the island of the *dhamma*. In response, the hierarchical (in terms of both the government and administrative) structure of the unitary state encompasses the potentially fragmenting northern and eastern periphery of Sri Lanka.

The irony of this unitarian narrative is one that continues to be lost on Sinhalese nationalism. The concept of the post-Westphalian unitary state with its emphasis on territorial sovereignty and fixed borders is one that has been incorporated into contemporary Sinhalese nationalist discourse via the encounter with British colonial rule. The very idea of the centralised nation-state was fundamentally alien to the great Hindu-Buddhist galactic polities of precolonial South and Southeast Asia.[72] Yet it is one that Sinhalese nationalists actively project into the precolonial past — through, for example, the notion of *dhammadipa* — as a means of addressing the separatism of the Tamil Other who seeks to fragment the *dhammadipa* from within. But the precolonial polities centred on Anuradhapura, Polonanaruva and Kandy were not centralised and bounded states. They were instead diffuse and unbounded galactic polities.[73] In this respect, they reflected the cosmological principles of what Michael Roberts (influenced by Stanley Tambiah) has characterised as the 'Asokan Persona'.[74]

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69 See Roberts (1994), pp 65–70. It is important to emphasise that this paradigm 'does not purport to describe the Emperor Asoka's rule over the Mauryan Empire in India in the third century BC': Roberts (1994), p 57.

70 Kemper (1991), p 2.

71 Roberts (1994), p 65.

72 See Tambiah (1976).

73 See Tambiah (1976), pp 102–31.

74 Roberts (1994), pp 57–72. See also Tambiah (1976), pp 54–72. Tambiah has characterised the Asokan polity as one in which 'at its apex was a king of kings subsuming in superior ritual and even fiscal relation a vast collection of local principalities and regional clusters … Such a political edifice was not so much a bureaucratised centralised imperial monarchy as a kind of galaxy-type structure

Roberts maintains that this Persona 'seeks to delineate the images and conceptions of authority which inform and underlie hierarchical relationships in Sinhala society'.[75] The dominant relation within this Persona is that between the *dhamma* (the Buddha) and the king, the *dhamma* encompassing the king in a hierarchical relation.[76] The superordinate status of the Buddha is manifest in the building of large Buddha statues which are 'representations of the superhuman aspects of the Buddha's personality'.[77]

The Buddha, however, having achieved *nirvana* (freedom from the cycle of rebirth), was no longer 'available as an intercessionary within this world'.[78] Consequently, 'people could acquire merit through worship of the Buddha or representations of his immanence' but they could no longer 'approach him ... for succour in the daily round of existence'.[79] The king and an army of gods who were 'incorporated into Buddhist conceptions and practices as sources of therapeutic aid' filled this absence.[80]

As Roberts observes, righteous kingship would lead to the acquisition of merit (*karma*), which in turn has a 'cumulative effect [that] would compound blessings'[81] because the example of the righteous king is one that determines 'for good or for evil the moral structure of his subjects and hence ... their happiness or misery'.[82] The flip side of this was that the unrighteous king would render himself vulnerable and that this unrighteousness would manifest itself in bad *karma* that would similarly 'be diffused among his people' and could, for example, be interpreted as present in the occurrence of 'natural calamities'.[83] The relationship between *dhamma* and kingship, then, allowed for a certain indeterminacy in terms of outcome. Roberts' central point though is that the encompassing relation between the *dhamma* and the king was 'elaborated upon in the figure of ... Asoka'.[84]

The sense in which Buddhism comes to occupy the centre of the nation (Anuradhapura) is elaborated upon in the account in the thirteenth century chronicle, the *Thupavamsa*, of Dutugemunu's building of the Mahathupa, a shrine to house the relics of the Buddha.[85] The positioning of the Thupa

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with lesser political replicas revolving around the central entity and in perpetual motion of fission or incorporation.' Tambiah (1976), p 70.

75 Roberts (1994), p 58.

76 See Roberts (1994), p 58.

77 Gunarwardana, cited by Roberts (1994), p 59. We see this affirmation of the Buddha's 'cosmological sovereignty' (Roberts (1994), p 59) in the construction of monuments to the Buddha by King Dutugemunu following his defeat of the Tamil Hindu King Elara and the restoration of Buddhist kingship in Anuradhapura.

78 Roberts (1994), p 59.

79 Roberts (1994), p 59.

80 Roberts (1994), p 59.

81 Roberts (1994), p 60, my interpolation.

82 Ghosal, cited by Roberts (1994), p 60.

83 Ghosal, cited by Roberts (1994), p 60.

84 Roberts (1994), p 60.

85 Roberts (1994), p 67.

'within the boundaries of the centre of the nation (that is, Anuradhapura) [was] itself a visual metaphor of the centricity and implicity of Buddhism in Lanka'.[86] The sense in which 'the capital city was made to stand for the whole country and to embody its magical centre or essence ... was incorporated into coronation rituals through the act of *pradaksina*, the circumambulatory procession around the city which expressed, and renewed, the king's dominance over the whole society'.[87] Just as the capital encompassed the periphery, the king encompassed the social.

However, the Asokan Empire and those Sinhalese polities centred on Auradhapura, Polonnaruva and finally Kandy, far from being centralised or unitary states, were more likely to have been galactic polities of the 'type associated with the mandala concept'[88] characterised by 'an embracing of diversity around a center than a centralisation of power itself'.[89] The tendency towards 'omnicompetence and encompassing righteousness was occasioned by the sprawling nature of the Asokan empire and its inherently fissiparous tendency' and, as such, was 'centripetalising in intent'.[90] Polities informed by a cosmology in terminal flux 'involved machineries of administration or overlordship which were not merely pulsating in the spatial sense ... but involved a scale of forms with overlapping hierarchies and jurisdictions'.[91]

As Tambiah observes, these polities, although informed by a cosmology in which Buddhism and kingship came to occupy the centre of the polity, were also 'center-oriented formations with shifting and blurred boundaries'.[92] They were characterised by 'central royal domains surrounded by satellite principalities and provinces replicating the center on a smaller scale and at the margins had even more autonomous tributary principalities'.[93] Just as the cosmos, with its dynamics of flux, ensures that the boundary between an encompassing unity and a fragmented state of being (the demonic) is subject to reordering, these polities were 'multicentric, with rival "*kingdoms*" jostling each other, changing their margins, expanding and contracting, according to

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86 Greenwald, cited by Roberts (1994), p 67, my interpolation.

87 Roberts (1994), p 67.

88 Roberts (1994), p 61.

89 Tambiah, cited by Roberts (1994), p 61.

90 Tambiah, cited by Roberts (1994), p 62. These centripetal forces were also 'generated by the emergence of relic worship among the Buddhists' (Roberts (1992), p 62) in the Asokan period. The emergence of 'shrines containing the relics of the Buddha' was to serve as 'sacred enclaves containing the palladiums of the communities residing in the vicinity: Roberts (1992). p 62. In terms of function, its impact was 'centripetalising' (Wheatley, cited by Roberts (1994), p 62) and we encounter a similar process in the building of monuments to the Buddha by Dutugemunu following his defeat of the Tamil ruler Prince Elara and the march led by JR Jayewardene to the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy when opposing the Bandaranaike–Chelvanaygam Pact in October 1957.

91 Tambiah, cited by Roberts (1994), p 64.

92 Tambiah (1992), p 173

93 Tambiah (1992), p 173.

the fortunes of wars ... and diplomacy'.[94] These forms of spatial ordering stand in sharp contrast to the centralised bureaucracy introduced by the British from the mid-nineteenth century.

To the extent that the cosmos constitutes an interlocking whole, with the Buddha at the centre and the gods and the demons inhabiting the outward layers, with the Buddha ultimately capable of encompassing these other beings, this process of cosmic contestation oriented the bureaucratic processes of the precolonial polities. As Tambiah continues, 'within each major or minor principality, there were checks and balances, such as duplication within administrative "departments", interlocking and contesting factional formations of patrons and clients, and devolutionary processes of power [distribution]'.[95]

For example, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the last of the Sinhala kingdoms, Kandy, reflected this diffuse cosmological order both at the level of geography and administration. Its geographical construction mirrored the 'world of the gods'.[96] To the extent that the ontological horizon of the cosmos oriented the Kandyan landscape, 'its architects (the rulers) were seeking to partake of the power of the gods'.'[97] In terms of administration, the 'royal domain surrounding the capital city of Kandy was made up of nine small districts ... under the charge of officials called *rate mahatvaru*'.[98] Around the central domain, there were 12 provinces, 'an inner circle of smaller provinces and an outer circle of larger and remoter provinces'.[99] Just as the authority of the Buddha is subject to fragmentation by the demonic forces that inhabit the margins of the cosmos, the authority of the king 'waned as the provinces stretched farther away from the capital'.[100]

This devolutionary dynamic was also replicated at the level of administration for the Temple of the Tooth, as functionaries were divided into 'the *outer* and *inner* groups', the outer being concerned with general administration and the inner with ritual work.[101] This devolutionary imperative extended to the 'parcelling out of agricultural and forest lands and the manpower settled on them (finely graded by caste and tenurial rights) in terms of monastic (*viharagam*) and temple (*devalegam*) endowments, estates attached to offices held by the nobility (*nindagam*) and the royal estates (*gabadagam*)'.[102] To the extent that the cosmos was subject to relations of flux, the administrative practices of the Kandyan Kingdom 'allowed for and produced social and political processes that were flexible, accommodative and inclusionary as well as competitive, factional and fragmenting'.[103]

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94 Tambiah (1992), p 173, author's emphasis.

95 Tambiah (1992), p 173, my interpolation.

96 Duncan (1990), p 107.

97 Roberts (1994), p 67.

98 Tambiah (1992), p 173, author's emphasis.

99 Tambiah (1992), p 174.

100 Tambiah (1992), p 174.

101 Tambiah (1992), p 174, author's emphasis.

102 Tambiah (1992), p 174, author's emphasis.

103 Tambiah (1992), p 174, author's emphasis

It was this pattern of devolution and replication that solicited and even encouraged the inclusion and incorporation of minorities, war captives and migrants from South India.[104] In accordance with the capacity of demonic spirits to transform themselves into higher beings, their demonic potential encompassed by the Buddha, 'it was this galactic blueprint that positively enabled the Sinhalisation and Buddhicisation of south Indian peoples and gods to continue uncoerced'.[105]

So, while the precolonial polities articulated the cosmological relations of flux, in the British and postcolonial period it is the hierarchical aspect as opposed to the diffusionary or transformatory aspect of the cosmos that resonates in the discourse and practice of both Sinhalese nationalism and the dynamics of administration. The cosmological principles of Sinhalese Buddhism allowed for 'flexible processes of hierarchical incorporation or expulsion'[106] — as manifested, for example, in the administrative practices of the Kandyan Kingdom. But from the late nineteenth century onwards, impelled by a reading of the Sinhala chronicles that emphasised the notion of Sri Lanka as the land of the *dhammadipa*, these 'historical charters were reactivated ... to construe the objectives and immanence of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism and to make it the experience and aspirations of the masses and public at large'.[107] It was the hierarchical aspect of the cosmos, with its emphasis on the encompassing capacity of the Buddha, that provided these historical charters with an ontological force and depth. Once they were articulated within the contingency of the social (and given that this ontological horizon was one already inscribed in the daily practices of the Sinhalese), they could lead to an encompassing violence directed against the fragmenting claims of the Tamil Other as embodied in the postcolonial Tamil claim to a greater devolution of power from the centre.

It is against the background of this hierarchical ontological horizon in which the Buddha has the capacity to encompass the demonic that the postcolonial unitary state has, 'impelled by calculations of majoritarian arithmetic',[108] sought to consistently encompass the geographical periphery of the Sinhala nation, identified with the Tamil-dominated northern and eastern provinces. In terms of the playing out of cosmic forces, the hierarchical aspect of the cosmos has encompassed the diffusionist aspect of the cosmos. In accordance with these cosmological principles, the sense in which the purpose of Sinhala Buddhist kingship is associated with the unity of the Sinhala Buddhist nation, this has in the fetishised discourse of Sinhalese nationalism come to be aligned with a conceptualisation of unity founded in a hierarchical territorial integrity guaranteed by the unitary state.[109] Consequently, devolution has consistently been projected as representing the potentially demonic and

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104 See Tambiah (1992), p 174.

105 See Tambiah (1992), p 175.

106 Tambiah 1(992), p 176.

107 Tambiah (1992), p 176.

108 Tambiah (1992), p 176.

109 See Roberts (1994), pp 68–70; see also Kapferer (1998), pp 97–98.

fragmenting forces of the northern and eastern periphery, as seen in the hostile Sinhalese response to both the Provincial Councils of 1988 and the more recent devolution proposals in 1996 which still form the basis of the peace process initiated in February 2002.

Characteristic of both the District Councils of 1980 and the Provincial Councils established in 1988 was the extent to which the centre encompassed the capacity of the periphery to act and legislate in a manner that was autonomous of the centre. Had the periphery been given space in which to develop its administrative practices, it would have had the potential to transform the relation between the centre and the periphery in a way characteristic of the dynamic centre–periphery relations of the precolonial galactic polities. Instead, under the Thirteenth Amendment, the capacity of provincial councils to legislate — for example, on law and order, education, and the alienation of land — has been frustrated by the failure to actively devolve power and money and the capacity of the centre to legislate for those areas stipulated in the Provincial Councils List. In effect, the centre encompassed the capacity of the provinces to act autonomously and thereby limit its perceived fragmenting potential.

On the one hand, devolution in the form of the legislative responsibility of the Provincial Councils represents the demonic potential of the cosmos, the power of the demonic to fragment the encompassing and hence integrative capacity of the Buddha. On the other hand, the centralising dynamic of the centre encapsulated by the Governor as the provincial representative of the centre embodies the re-encompassing capacity of the Buddha to reunify a fragmenting cosmos, to reconstitute as whole that which was disintegrating. It was against similar claims to a fragmentation of the *dhammadipa* that Sections 1 (which describes Sri Lanka as an indissoluble Union of Regions), 2 (prohibition from altering the names and boundaries of regions) and 7 (the paramount status of Buddhism) were introduced in the 1996 devolution proposals. The hierarchical aspect of the cosmos manifests itself in the manner in which these provisions seek to encompass the geographical periphery inhabited by the Tamil Other.

The Buddha ultimately resubordinates the fragmenting capacity of the demonic at the base of this hierarchical cosmology. These provisions, in seeking to maintain the territorial integrity of the island as encapsulated in the unitary state, similarly seek to preserve the *dhammadipa* by encompassing the fragmenting potential of devolution, which is synonymous with the Tamil Other. In resubordinating the Tamil Other at the base of the hierarchical state, these provisions have the capacity to simultaneously restore stability to the cosmological order and by extension reterritorialise the Sinhala state.

However, there are provisions in the 1996 proposals, such as the Chief Ministers' Conference, the devolution of finance, land alienation and education, which also reflect the dynamic and transformative aspect of the cosmos. To the extent that the purpose of this monthly conference is to ensure that devolution remains a live and ongoing process, as well as settling any disputes that arise between regions, then this embodies the administrative dynamic of the precolonial galactic polities whose territorial integrity was

never fixed and which as a consequence articulated devolved patterns of administration. The transformative aspect of the cosmos ensures that the boundary between an encompassing unity associated with the Buddha and the fragmenting capacity of the demonic is in a continual state of flux. By extension, the nature of devolution envisaged in these proposals from 1996 — and still the basis of current negotiations — is one that like the galactic polities has the potential to lead to a reordering of relations between the centre and the periphery.

The dynamic contestation of the cosmos is one that in part orients the administrative practices presented in the devolution proposals from 1996. A system of checks and balances characterises the envisaged relationship between the centre and the proposed Regional Councils, each having a much more clearly delineated area of legislative responsibility than in the past, as well as the capacity for the relation between the two to be subject to a degree of contestation. This parcelling out of legislative responsibility in a sense represents the diminishing authority of the Buddha on the margins of the cosmos. To the extent that these proposals envisage diminished power at the centre, they reflect a dynamic feature of the Buddhist cosmos. The hierarchical and encompassing power of the Buddha is one that never realises an absolute state of being, but is instead one that (like the relation between the centre and the periphery envisaged through regional councils) is subject to a continual process of transformative reordering. The implication of this process is that, just as the devolved administrative practices of the galactic polities allowed for the inclusion of the other in a relatively uncoercive relation, the devolution of administration envisaged in the 1996 proposals and in the more recent 2002 proposals has the capacity to similarly lead to a political settlement in which the plural nature of Sri Lankan society can find expression at the level of governmental and administrative practices. This will most importantly embody the non-centralising values of the Buddhist cosmos itself which, contra the Sinhalese nationalist imagination, has an inclusive dynamic that renders hierarchy obsolete.

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