

Class and Ethnic Prejudice in 19th-20th Century Ceylon

Dr. Michael Roberts

People Inbetween: Ethnic & Class Prejudices in British Ceylon

Michael Roberts

The National Trust's brief was for me to present motifs from the book *People Inbetween. The Burghers and the Middle Class in the Transformations within Sri Lanka, 1790-1960s*, (Ratmalana, Sarvodaya Book Publishing Services, 1989) and more specifically its first chapter viz. “**Pejorative Phrases: the Anti-colonial Response and Sinhala Perceptions of the Self through Images of the Burghers .**”

Many think *People Inbetween* is a history of the Burghers. Not so. It is multi-faceted. It describes (a) the rise of the middle class in British times, an influential force within which the Burghers were a critical element and a vanguard in the questioning of British rule; (b) the initial strands in the development of

Ceylonese nationalism and (c) the development of Colombo into a metropolitan hub that became the island's hegemonic centre.

The latter theme, namely, the emphasis on Colombo's centrality, is often forgotten or missed in commentary on the book. That is why I have presented three illustrations from the many appendages in the book that provide a glimpse of this centrality, namely, a map of the internal migration to Colombo locality seen in the 1971 census and a distilled table showing the distribution of tenement owners in the municipal area of the city as it was constituted in 1868 (merely a tithe of the data in the book). [See Figures 1, 2 and 3 here.](#)

Volume of net migration from district of birth to district of enumeration of more than 10,000 migrants. 1971

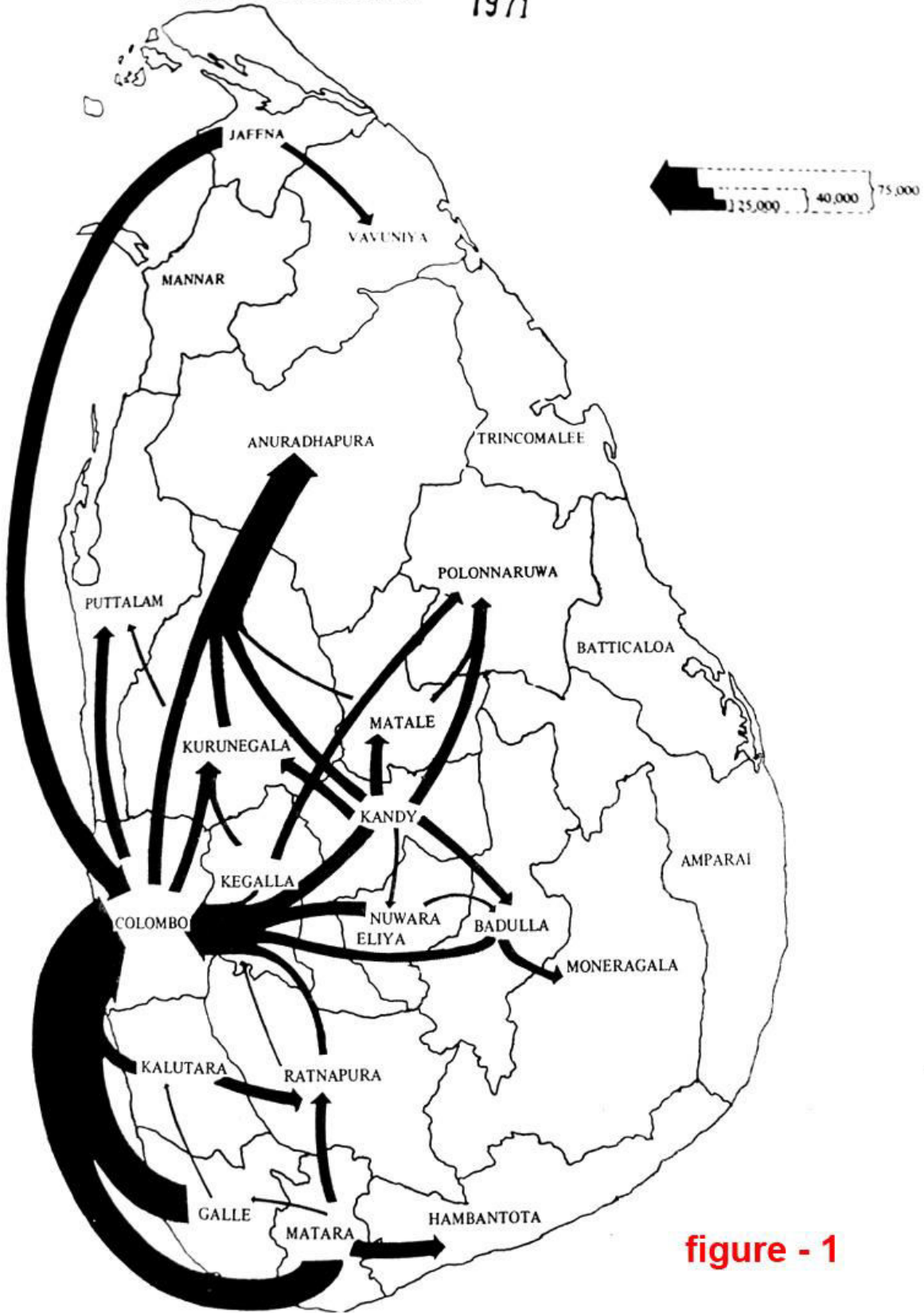


figure - 1

TRANSPORT NETWORK 1814 - 1913

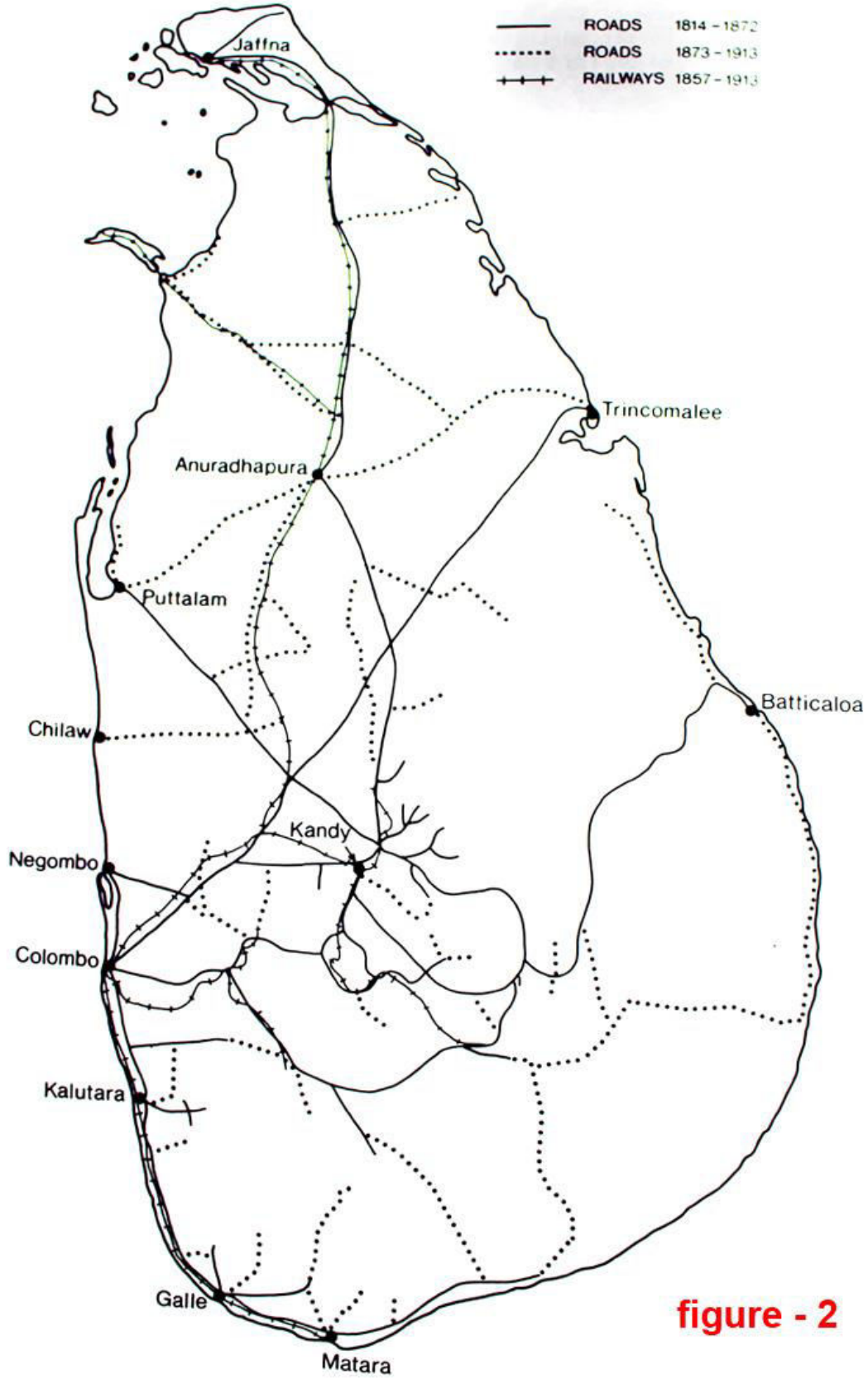


figure - 2

Colombo Allotments

TABLE 7: ALLOTMENT OWNERS IN COLOMBO, 1868: ETHNIC DISTRIBUTION

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
							Population of Colombo Comparisons		
	Number of Tenements	Extent in Acres	% Number of Tenements	% Extent	Percentage Modified Version of col.3	Percentage Modified Version of col.4	Percentage a/c 1871 Census	Percentage a/c 1881 Census	
1. Sinhalese	4,537	1,645.46	46.1	51.3	50.8	60.1	44.3	42.4	
2. Bharatha	95	41.51	1.0	1.3	0.9	1.5	n.s.	n.s.	
3. Tamil	588	36.21	6.0	1.1	6.6	1.3	20.1	23.2	
4. Moos	2,432	419.78	24.7	13.1	27.2	15.2	23.5	21.3	
5. Malay	80	4.78	0.8	0.1	0.9	0.2	2.6	2.7	
6. Burgher	429	241.39	4.4	7.5	4.8	8.8	6.7	7.9	
7. European	404	266.04	4.1	8.3	4.5	9.7	0.9	1.1	
8. Chetty	164	18.33	1.7	0.6	1.8	0.7	1.2	n.s.	
9. Col. Chetty	179	62.11	1.8	1.9	2.0	2.3	n.s.	n.s.	
10. Borah	18	3.93	0.2	0.1	0.2	0.1	n.s.	n.s.	
11. Mixed Partnerships	98	36.21	1.0	1.1	Total	100	100	100	
12. Unidentified	494	90.95	9.4%	5.0	15.5% Figures	8926	2739.51	95,238	110,502
13. Corporate Bodies	334	340.54	3.4	10.6					

figure - 3

The economic and political domination of the island that reposed in Colombo was compounded by the fact that it was the symbolic centre of cultural fashion (e. g. in the style of architecture for mansions) and the island's ideological command post, both facets that were exercised in part through the considerable influence of English-media newspapers. Since the Burghers were seven per cent of the city's population even as late as 1911 and a powerful component in the middle class in the decades leading up to that point, one can see why they figure so prominently in the explorations within *People Inbetween*.

The rise of the local middle class interlaced with capitalist modernization in the 19th century-and-thereafter, with the British road/rail transport network and the expansion of coffee plantations in the Central Highlands forming the keystones for economic growth and exploitation. The British also instituted a new bureaucratic order, one integral to the state form that was being moulded in Europe at the same stage. English was the media of state administration. Able to pick up English quickly and located in key urban centres, the small Burgher population profited from the channels of educational

advancement that opened up in the 19th century and filled intermediary roles in the administration, while also providing a significant number of schoolteachers in towns.

Education brought the intellectual currents of Europe to the small corpus constituted by the English-proficient middle class in the early-mid 19th century. A few Burghers (Charles Ambrose Lorenz, George and Frederick Nell, John Prins and Charles Ferdinands) got together and launched an erudite literary magazine called *Young Ceylon* in 1850-52 – a display of burgeoning talent and an outstanding testimony to the influence within this circle of the Romantic Movement in Europe. See [Figures 4 and 5](#).

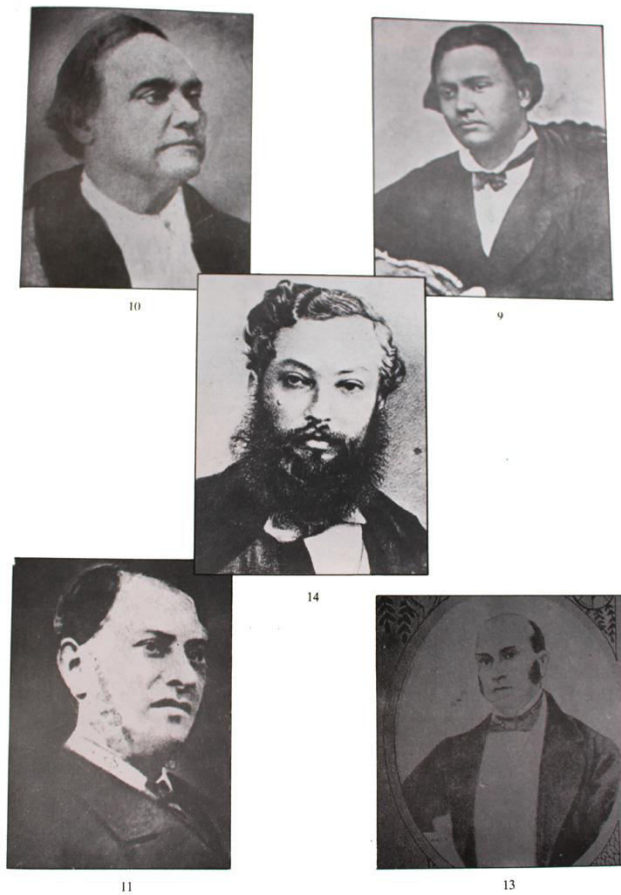


figure - 4

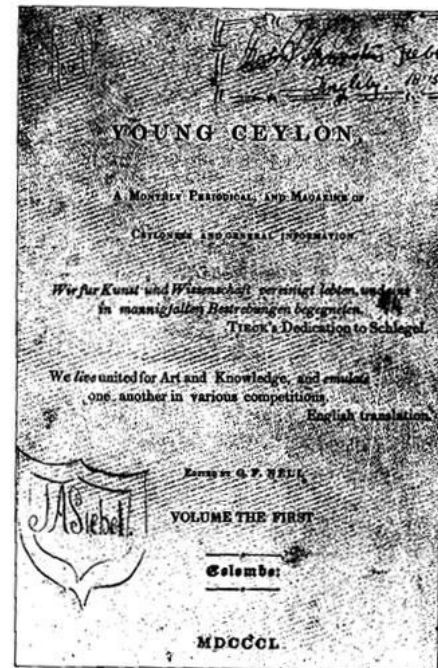
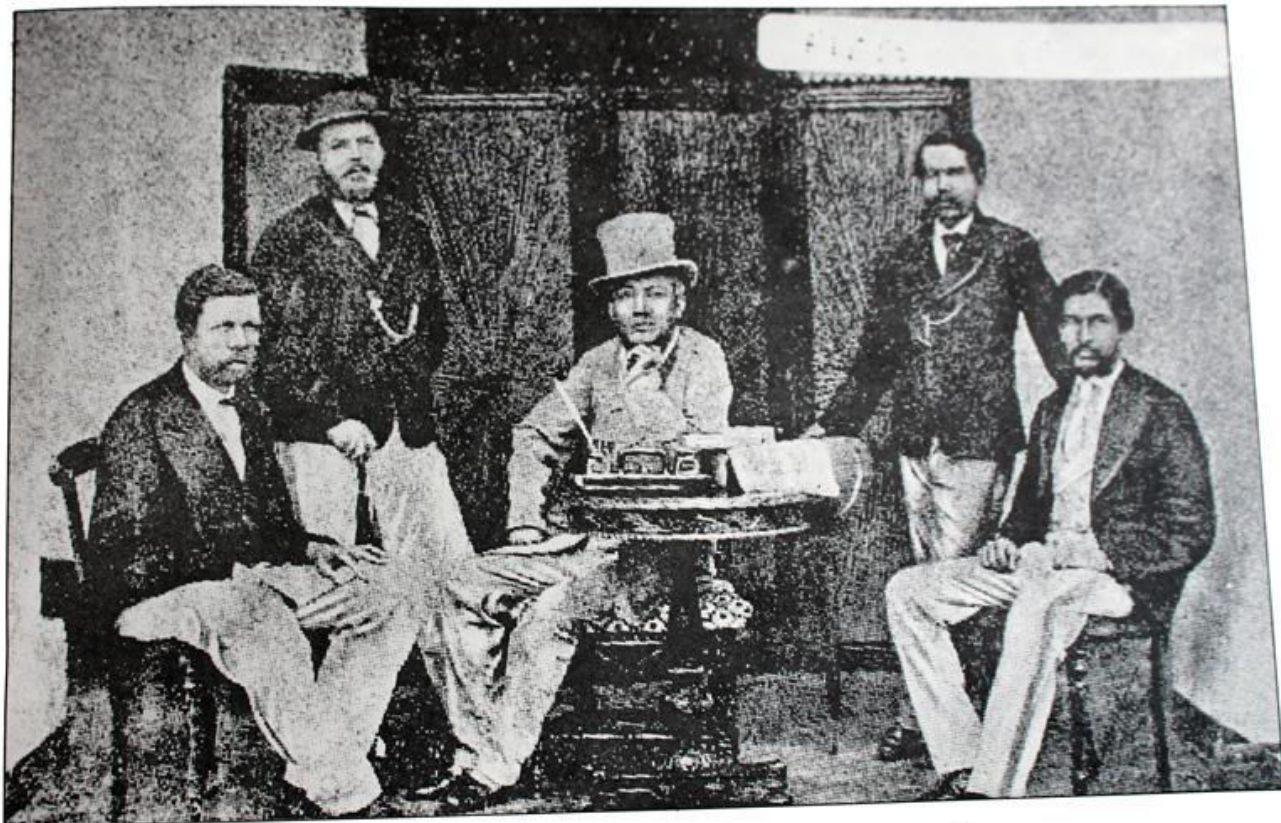


PLATE 7 TITLE PAGE OF THE JOURNAL, YOUNG CEYLON VOLUME I

Source: Copy in the possession of Deloraine Brohier. It will be evident that this copy belonged to John Siebel. That in the National Library at Canberra belonged to Louis Nell because it has his annotations; and passed into the hands of the Library via J.A. Martens. There are very few copies of this journal extant today.

figure - 5

The political edge motivating these men was more explicit in the anonymous work by “**Henry Candidus**” (probably Lorenz) published in 1853 and thereafter in the marshaling of effort in 1859 to purchase an English newspaper – the *Ceylon Examine* – so as to provide a critical voice directed towards keeping the (autocratic) colonial government on its toes. **See Figure 6.**



Note the opening lines in Candidus’s “**Preface**”: “The educated amongst the Natives (including Burghers) are far from being satisfied with the government under which they live. They feel in many respects that England in many respects is wanting in her duty to them. If there is one thing more than another which Young India and Young Ceylon laments, it is the absence of Patriotism and the existence of utter indifference to freedom among their countrymen.”¹

Such strands of activity and the initial, muted challenges² directed at the British belief in their racial superiority are among the details pursued in the body of the book. At the same time, however, the underlying context in which such threads of development occurred is set out in the first chapter, namely, “Pejorative Phrases.” This chapter explores and elaborates upon (1) the complex threads of class differentiation within the ethnic groups that constituted Ceylon’s social order and (2) the lines of ethnic

differentiation that persisted at the same time. Disparaging epithets are the chief medium for these explorations.

The Britons in Ceylon were stratified. The gentry-class made up of the Civil Servants and other public servants, the leading businessmen and planters kept aloof from the petty functionaries such as the shop assistants (called “shoppies”) at places in Cargills and the railway drivers. The Burghers themselves were sharply divided in the 19th century -- with the differentiation being imprinted in the terminology “front door Burghers” and “back door Burghers.” Both in English and Sinhalese this line of class difference was embodied in the distinction between the respectable “Lansi” and, supposedly, the not-so-respectable “Tupass.”

The latter term *Tupass* (also written as *Topaz*) was a carry-over from the period of Dutch rule, where the racially conscious Dutch gentry had adopted a term emanating from the sea lanes of the preceding Portuguese Empire in the Indian Ocean, namely, *Topaz* and *Tupass* – used to delineate Native Christians and others who were go-betweens as well as the progeny of mixed marriages/liaisons³ -- to differentiate the Portuguese descendants in the Maritime Provinces from the Dutch ruling classes. This differentiation was further underlined by the use of the Dutch epithet *kakkerlak* to disparage these people, people who were usually darker-skinned.⁴

In time, however, that very epithet, translated into Sinhala as *kārapottā* (or *kārapoththā*), became widely used over the British period in English argot as well as Sinhala badinage to depict all Burghers. This usage is clarified in *People Inbetween* through ethnographic explorations as well as documentary illustrations which pinpoint the mix of banter and abuse in the incidents and contexts of usage. So, this specific theme is also a tale of poetic justice insofar as racial prejudice enveloped the original Dutch wielders of prejudice in their own coinage.

The use of *kārapotta* and *kārapotu lansi* as pejoratives is placed alongside a whole battery of epithets in the Sinhala-world which depicted the invading forces from Europe and abroad from the sixteenth century onwards: notably, *parangi*⁵ and *tuppahi*. Such terminology was accentuated when a speaker/writer added the inflection *yā* to constitute the epithets as *tuppahiyā*, *kārapotu lansiya* or *lansiya* or worse still as *para lansiya* (low and alien Burgher). In effect, such terminology placed the European peoples and their progeny outside the valued native dispensation of the Sinhalese.

This was a reading of the European imperial impact rooted in the war poems of the Portuguese period (but also embodied in the *Ingrīsi Hatana* describing the war of the people of *Sīhale*⁶ against the invading

English armies in 1803).⁷ Thus, the stock of epithets lead us to a distilled understanding of Sinhalese nationalism in the British period, a form of nativism that embodied a cultural bedrock at the same time that it served as an expressive weapon of the downtrodden.

It was a weapon of the underprivileged (Sinhala) classes because it was also a response to the widespread tendency among the emerging middle classes in British Ceylon, whether Sinhala, Burgher or other, to depict the rural masses as *yakoes* and *godayās* (that is, rustics without knowledge – meaning English-media knowledge). Thus, the abusive terms *para lansiyā* and *thuppahiyā* cannot be comprehended without attention to such terms as *godayā* and *yako*. The former were counter thrusts. **Figures 7 and 8** present the charts deployed in *People Inbetween* to depict these counter-thrusts constituted by two interlacing strands, those of Sinhalese indigenism and Sinhalese nationalism. The two charts, in fact, serve as a distillation of the theses in my first chapter “Pejorative Phrases.”

CHART 1 SOME TWENTIETH CENTURY ETHNIC PEJORATIVES IN SINHALA & CEYLONESE ENGLISH

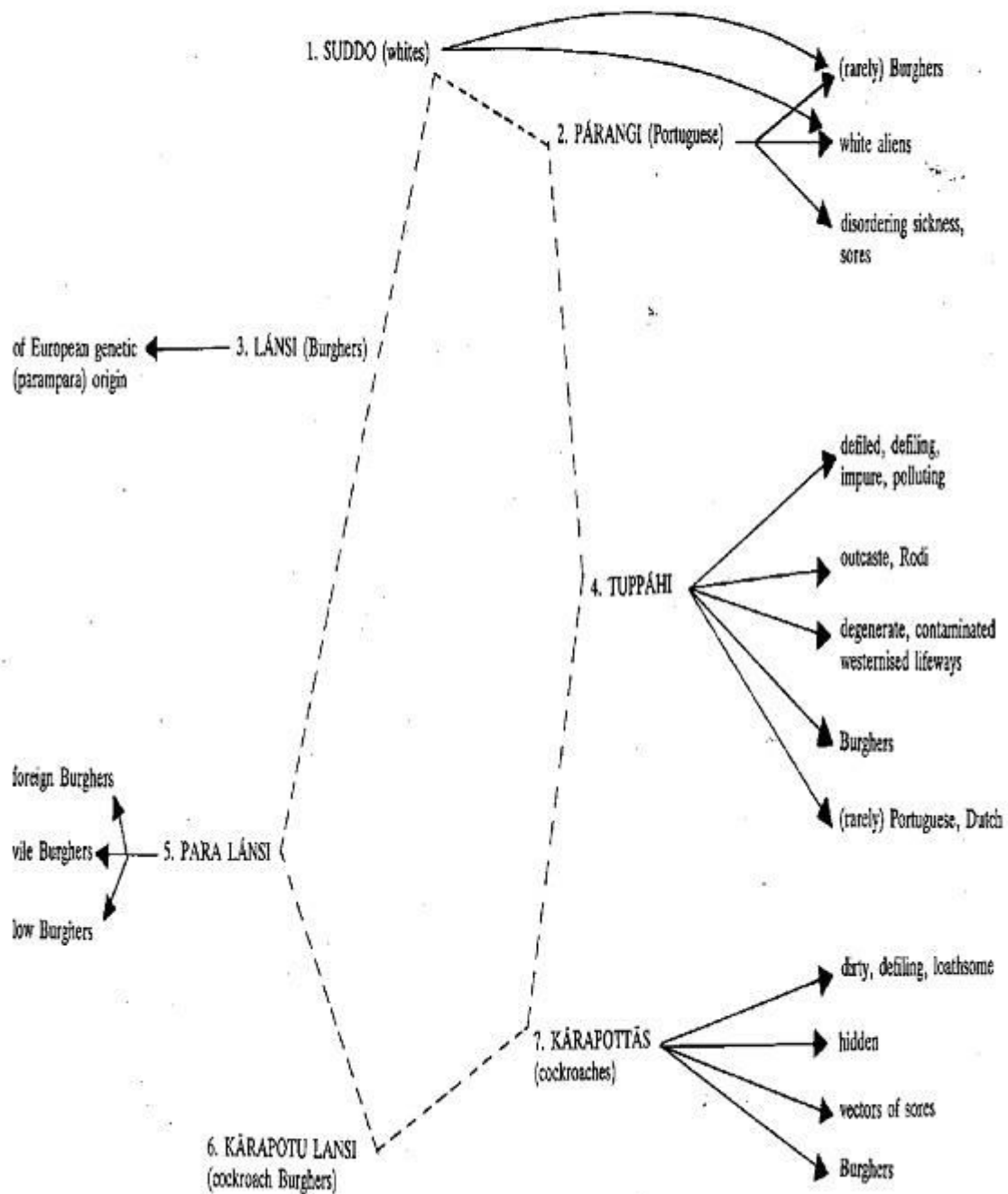
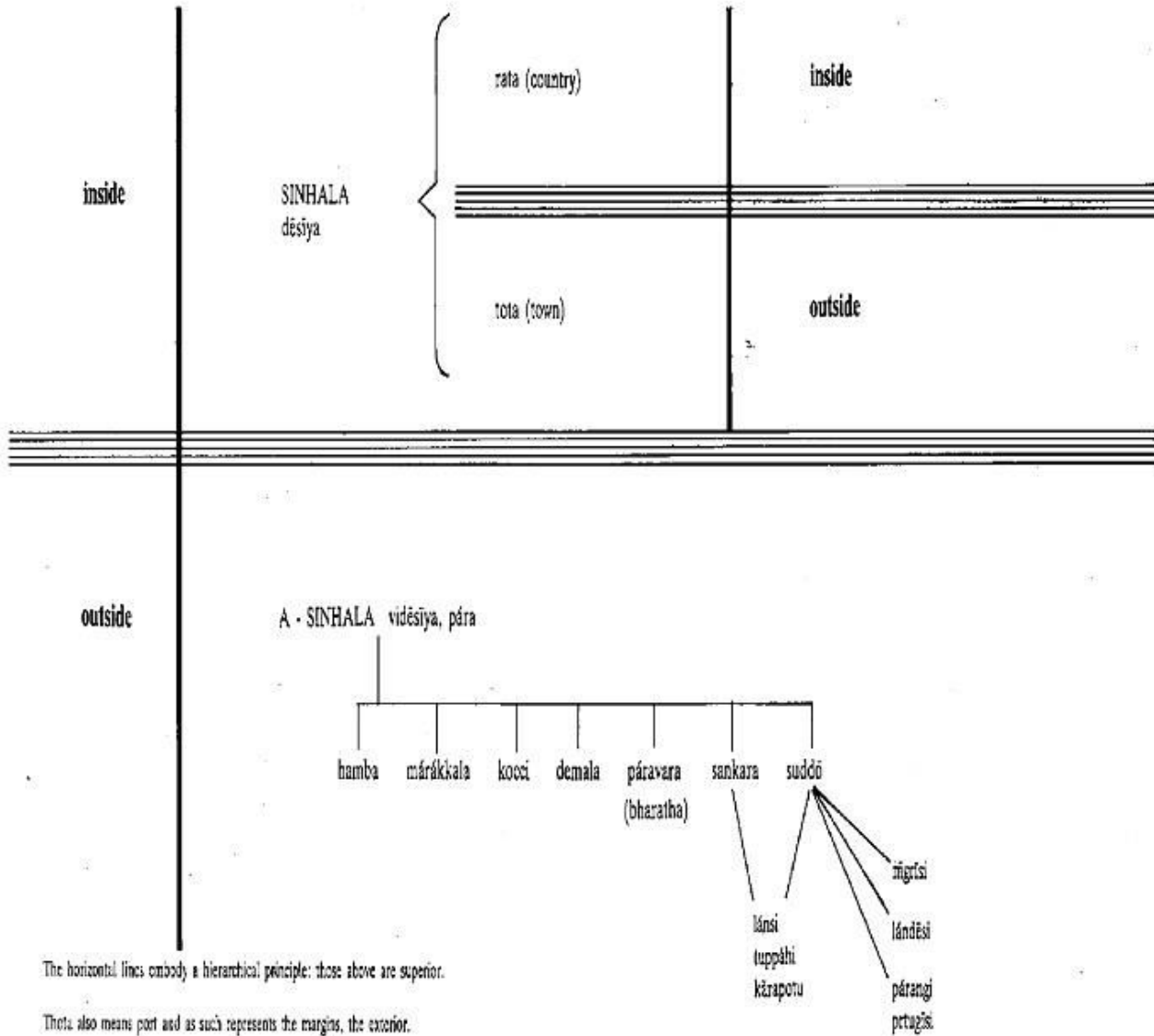


figure - 7

CHART 2 THE INSIDE: OUTSIDE AS AN ORGANIZING PRINCIPLE IN THE SINHALA WORLD VIEW



The horizontal lines embody a hierarchical principle: those above are superior.

Tota also means port and as such represents the margins, the exterior.

The A - Sinhala, or un - Sinhala, are subdivided into various categories. For reasons of spatial economy the following have not been included though they have been part of the experiential order since the early nineteenth century; the Malays (usually incorporated into the term "Muslims"), the Colombo Chetties, the Borahs, the Sindhis, the Chetties, the Kaffirs, the Chinese, the Afghans.

figure - 8

The fuller comprehension of these charts, however, demands close attention to the detailed clarification of the strands of Sinhala nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th century within that chapter. These strands were also multi-faceted. One major thread was the movement for the rejuvenation of Buddhism in the face of Christian missionary proselytization-cum-denigration.⁸ Another was the fight to prevent the cultural degeneration of the Sinhala people in the face of Western lifeways – in brief the attack on Westernization.

Though the influence of Anagarika Dharmapala must feature in any account of these inter-related strands, in “**Pejorative Phrases**,” the principal medium for a comprehension of this corpus of thinking is the work of Piyadasa Sirisena (featured in **Figure 9**). Sirisena (1875-1946) was not a simple traditionalist: he was a pioneer in popularizing a new feature, the romantic love story in Sinhala novel, a new medium catering, as Sarath Amunugama has shown (1979), to the emerging lower-middle classes and bourgeoisie.



figure - 9

“Pejorative Phrases” dissects Sirisena’s first three novels in particular, namely, *Jayatissa saha Roslin* (1906), *Maha Viyavula* (1909) and *Apata Vecca De* (1909). Note that *Jayatissa saha Roslin* had been reprinted as a fifth edition by 1916. Indeed, it was claimed that 25,000 copies had been sold up to that date. Moreover, his novels were regularly reprinted by his son or the firm of MD Gunasena & Co right through into the 1960s. A typical plot in Sirisena’s novel sees a Sinhalese lad or girl misled by a Burgher girl or man, losing contact with parental home and ending up dissolute and poor, sometimes in the occupation *sapaththu-kāra*, that is, as shoemaker, a most despicable trade in the caste-thinking of the Indian subcontinent.

Sirisena’s literature seeks to protect four concepts: the *jātiya* (race, nation); *āgama* or *gunadharmā* (religion, virtues), *sirit virit* and *kulaya* (traditional practices inclusive of caste distinctions) and *bhāshava* (language).⁹ Thus, among the several motifs his novels present the following equation: mixed bloods (*samkara*) = unclean (*apirisidu*, *nīca*) = unstable and fickle (*chapala*). In opposition, to be Arya Sinhala was to be pure and the epitome of virtue, stability and order.

Here, then, in Sirisena’ thinking one finds the imprint of the either/or epistemology etched into Western thought with its sharp, racialized distinctions between “Aryan” and “Dravidian” or White distinct from Black. But, here in British Ceylon, such racialized differentiation was also mapped unto caste. That is, the indigenous caste ideology was meshed with racial differentiation. This was a deadly cocktail.

As noted in “Pejorative Phrases” (1989: 19), “it is not [the argument] that when a non-Burgher speaker uses one of these [epithets] in abusive intent, he/she is necessarily bringing in all the associations into focus. It is sufficient that we point to the cultural logic and the principles which order the use of such terms of disparagement. ... The Burghers stood for defiling impurity, for disorder. They were, therefore, *samkara*, *para*, *thuppahi*, *pahat*, *nīca*, *vanacara*, *gättara* and *nosandala*” (1989: 19).

The impact of such lines of thought was all the more profound because Sirisena was also a political activist. For one, he edited the *Sarasavi Sandarāsa* for quite some time. For another, he was an activist in the temperance movement and participated as an outreach campaigner for the Central Total Abstinence Society during that association’s protest activities in the period 1912-15. He was a member of the Ceylon National Congress and was tasked with moving the resolution in September 1919 which gave the Lanka Mahajana Sabhā its name (Roberts 1994b: 307). The latter, significantly, was an instrument sponsored by F. R. Senanayake. It is likely that Sirisena’s activism extended into the

endeavours of the All-Ceylon Village Committees of the 1920s and even possibly that of the Sinhala Maha Sabhā from 1936, but that is uncharted territory. A fuller comprehension of the probable interplay between different generations of Sinhala-speaking activists stretching from the 1880s to the 1950s can be gleaned from the data presented in my article “**The 1956 generations: after and before**” (Roberts 1994).

Our living generations today have enough older cohorts who can attest to the power of the motifs identified in “**Pejorative Phrases**” in the electoral politics of the 1940s to 1960s. In 1956 in particular the epithet *thuppahi* was a powerful weapon in the demagogic speeches mounted by the rhetoricians of the Mahajana Eksat Peramuna, notably Professor W. S. Karunaratne, Philip Gunawardena and L. H. Mettānanda, during the election campaign that brought this coalition to power in 1956. “Thuppahi” at this stage embraced all the Westernized elements in Sri Lanka, whether Burgher, Sinhala, Tamil or Colombo Chetty. As *thuppahi*, they were *paradēsakkēra*, natives who had become alien – deserving the trampling act directed against *kārapottu*. Epithet and lampoon are powerful political tools.

Underlying all this then is a semantic structure that pits Insider against Outsider (Chart Two presented here as **Figure 8**). This is a basic coding system in the caste dispensation of South Asia. In Sri Lanka it appears to have been turned into a vessel of ethnic essentialism as denoted in the term “*a-sinhala*” or *un-Sinhala* (literally outside Sinhala).¹⁰ In this subterranean coding the thinking mapped unto a segmentary structure in Sinhala-linguistic forms which enabled native-speakers to deploy the term *pita minissu* in a series of concentric meanings that worked like a Chinese-box.¹¹ Given such modalities of thought, it was feasible for a Sinhala nativist to value the Sinhalese of the *rata* (interior) as superior to those of the *tota* (port) because the latter had become Westernized and/or mixed – and thus mixed up and *apirisidu*. Roslin was a suitable love-match for Jayatissa because she was *rata* not *tota* (Roberts et al, *People Inbetween*, 1989: 19-20).

So, in this argument in “Pejorative Phrases,” the pattern etched in Figure 7 (Chart One) interlaces with, and supports, those embodied in Figure 8 (Chart Two). This is thinking reposing below the surface, working insidiously and yet powerfully. Amen.

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¹ Henry Candidus, “A Desultory Conversation between Two Young Aristocratic Ceylonese,” in Michael Roberts (ed.) *Sri Lanka. Collective Identities Revisited*, Vol. II. Colombo, Marga, 1998, pp. 1-2.

² One arena of challenge was the sports field, both at athletic gymkhanas and at cricket. Thus, in May 1887 the local “Ceylonese” took on the local “Europeans” in a “Test Match” on the cricket (which the Europeans won). This became an annual encounter. In 1887, significantly, the eleven players representing the Ceylonese were all Burghers, mostly from the Colts Cricket Club located in one of the Burgher heartlands, namely the Pettah. See S. P. Foenander, *Sixty Years of Ceylon Cricket*, Colombo, 1924, pp. 158 & 167 and Roberts et al, *People Inbetween*, 1989, pp. 121-22.

³ See Yule & Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, 1886 and Roberts et al, *People Inbetween*, 1989, pp. 7, 8, 17-18, 35-43, 48-49, 140-47, 199-200, 212.

⁴ Roberts et al, *People Inbetween*, 1989, pp. 8, 41.

⁵ *Parangi* referred to the Portuguese, but was also a term utilized to describe a syphilitic disease, one that some Sinhalese understood to be a suffering introduced by the Portuguese and/or foreigners.

⁶ This term *Sīhalē* is the proper designation for what we refer to nowadays, following British usage, as the “Kingdom of Kandy.” In most contexts of usage in the medieval and ancient periods *Sīhalē* (and its synonyms) denoted the whole island, the practice being sustained by the fact that the Dutch accepted their designation of being His Majesty’s guardians of the coast. This may seem to us a fiction. But that is to impose a 21st century perspective and a failure to grasp the state form of “tributary overlordship” (Roberts, 2004: 59-63, 70, 75-84, 86-87, 123-24). Note that there other synonyms for *Sīhalē*: *Sīhalaya*, *Tunsinhalaya*, *Heladiv*, et cetera. The concept and practice of *solosmsthāna* also sustained the all-island perspective enshrined in this nomenclature.

⁷ In *People Inbetween* this aspect is only touched on briefly – using Chandra R de Silva’s short article in 1983. However, a considerable clarification is provided in chapter 6 of Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness* (2004) on the basis of a detailed study of the war poems (*hatan kavi*) with the aid of such specialists as Ananda Wakkumbura, Paul E. Pieris, Sandadas Coperahewa, PB Meegaskumbura, Srinath Ganewatte and KBA Edmund.

⁸ See Malalgoda 1973 &1976 and Wickremeratne 1969.

⁹ The influence of the model of “triple gem’ is such that Sirisena usually presented these four motifs in clusters of three – with one dropped.

¹⁰ See Cyril Mathew, *Sinhalayāgē Adisi Saturā*, Galle, 1970 and Roberts et al, *People Inbetween*, 1989, 19-21.

¹¹ The concept “segmentary structure” is clarified in fuller fashion in Roberts, *Sinhala Consciousness*, 2004: 17, 30-33, 136ff. Also see E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Nuer*, 1940. It is clarified in a lucid and simple manner in the Bedouin saying: “I, my brother and my cousins against the world. I and my brother against my cousins. I against my brother.”