

Re-exploring the Links

History and Constructed Histories between Portugal and Sri Lanka

Edited by Jorge Flores



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Foreword

The international conference *Portugal-Sri Lanka: 500 Years*, held in Paris on December 15-17, 2005, exemplifies the principles that act as guidelines for the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation's activities: innovation, reliability and independence.

Innovation was expressed by the new directions that the conference introduced into the field of the historical relations linking Portugal and Sri Lanka, which had hitherto received little attention; reliability was confirmed by the fact that the conference managed to bring together the most important specialists in this field, as demonstrated by the exceptional standards of the papers and the debates that they stimulated; independence is the result of the Foundation's status as a private institution, which mean that ideas have always been discussed with total freedom and scientific openness at its premises in Lisbon and Paris.

One year later, the proceedings of *Portugal-Sri Lanka: 500 Years* are being published in this book, entitled *Re-exploring the Links: History and Constructed Histories between Portugal and Sri Lanka*. I hope that this work, the result of an exemplary partnership involving the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the Harrassowitz Publishing House, will be a fundamental tool for all those researching and interested in this field.

I would like to take the opportunity to congratulate Professor Jorge Flores for his brilliant co-ordination of the conference and the book, especially since he did both while simultaneously lecturing at Brown University in the USA. I would also like to thank the participants for their contributions during the conference, as they took three days from their busy schedules to exchange opinions and experiences, and are now able to see the results of their research in book form.

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation is currently celebrating its fiftieth anniversary. Since shortly after its creation in 1956, the Foundation has focused great attention on the history of relations between Portugal and other

countries, both by awarding scholarships and subsidies and by itself organising major events. Within this context, the programme to restore architectural heritage built by the Portuguese in Asia is of particular note, as is the Foundation's sponsorship of major exhibitions and international conferences such as the one that was the starting point for this publication.

Finally, fostering the spirit of this project on Sri Lanka, the Foundation will continue to organise major international conferences – held at its head office in Lisbon and at the Calouste Gulbenkian Centre in Paris – and to publish them in book form so that they will become a reference point in the study of relations involving the Portuguese and other peoples from all over the world.

Emilio Rui Vilar

Chairman of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

Preface

Sri Lanka occupied a permanent and rather singular place in the political imagination of early modern Portugal. In August 1499, still influenced by the mythical aura that surrounded the island of Taprobane in medieval Europe, King Manuel I (r. 1495-1521) wrote for the first time about the wonders of *Ceylam*. Almost two centuries later, in the 1680s, people like Captain João Ribeiro and the Jesuit Fernão de Queiroz prepared lengthy books on Sri Lanka. These books had intriguing titles (*The Historical Fatality of the Island of Ceylon*, and *The Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*, respectively), and were written with the explicit purpose of “forcing” the Portuguese king and his spin doctors to effect the Crown’s improbable return to the island. From the early 16th to the late 17th century, many Portuguese praised the advantages of Sri Lanka, and there was even talk of the island becoming the capital of the *Estado da Índia* in lieu of Goa. With such a background, it becomes easier to understand why, as late as the 1850s, the Portuguese ambassador to London was still fighting in the European diplomatic arena for the return of Colombo to Portuguese control.

The history of the rich and complex relationship between the two countries became a relevant research topic about a century ago. Well-known historians like P. E. Pieris, Donald Ferguson and S. G. Perera published extensively on this subject and, perhaps more importantly, revealed the importance of many Portuguese texts for the study of early modern Sri Lanka. Their endeavours were complemented in Portugal by the contributions of prominent scholars such as Sousa Viterbo, David Lopes and M. A. H. Fitzler, even though *Ceilão* failed to attract the attention of Portuguese historians during the *Estado Novo* and the early decades of democracy. Meanwhile, in the newly independent country of Sri Lanka, a new generation of skilled academics emerged and began to investigate Portuguese-Sri Lankan interactions. The late Tikiri Abeyasinghe, M. H. Goonatilleka and Chandra R. de Silva – all of whom received scholarships from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to conduct research in Portugal – familiarized themselves with Portuguese sources and published seminal works on the theme. Now, younger international scholars engaged in the study of more appealing subjects and benefiting from the most

recent theoretical resources available in the social sciences and the humanities, have taken on the responsibility of continuing this work. Chandra R. de Silva, in his introductory essay to the present volume, provides a groundbreaking analysis of the new historiographical trends in this field.

While published on the occasion of the Portuguese arrival in Sri Lanka five centuries ago, this collection of essays is far from a celebratory piece. Commemorations of dates and events are complex exercises, for they are usually designed to reinforce the collective memory of the Self, even if such remembrance often brings pain to the Other. One way or another, we are dealing with constructions and – as historians and social scientists will be quick to recognize – history is a sort of flea-market, where anyone can get virtually anything. In the not-so-distant past, the primary concern of scholars dealing with the so-called “Portuguese expansion” was to find heroes, men like Prince Henry and Vasco da Gama, who were to be “polished” according to the political circumstances of the moment. Nowadays, we continue to visit the flea-market of history, but we prefer to search for “encounters of cultures” and “meetings of civilizations” – concepts that, even if they were largely alien to the Portuguese navigators of the 15th and 16th centuries, are considered as useful political formulas for easing conflicts and misunderstandings between Western and non-Western societies. On the other hand, in many Asian countries (particularly in those that became independent from the mid-20th century onwards), one tends to visit the flea-market of history in order to find ruthless European colonisers, whose purposes over the centuries were to kill peaceful people, spread diseases and destroy emerging nations.

It is my view that we do not have to be the perpetual prisoners of historical paradigms created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, nor should we be held hostage to political and national constructions developed in the second half of the 1900s. Following Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, in his *How to Write the History of the New World* (2001), I “assume that the emphasis in traditional historiography on identities as oppositional binaries (i.e. colonized-colonizers; Amerindian-European) misses many of the actual interactions (“hybridities”) that characterize colonial situations”. In a similar vein, but with broader geographical and civilizational horizons, historians like Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Serge Gruzinski have recently argued in favour, respectively, of a history made of “connected histories”, and of a world made of *mondes mêlés*, where such dichotomies are to be questioned and, to a considerable degree, reshaped.

This book does not conform to nationalist models of historical interpretation and refuses both the rhetoric of discovery and the rhetoric of aggression. Moreover, the purpose of the book is not to celebrate “encounters”, but to reinvent an academic debate, independent of any political agenda, and concerning a history that is Portuguese and Sri Lankan alike. As suggested in the title, our main purpose is to re-explore the historical links between Portugal and Sri Lanka from a scholarly perspective.

The essays in this volume are divided into four parts. The first, “Political Realities and Cultural Imagination”, argues for the need to return to primary texts, either by bringing new ones to light or by re-reading the “classics” with a different set of questions and problems in mind. The main goal here is to identify relevant connections between political and cultural history, and between the nitty-gritty of Portuguese-Sri Lankan relations and the formulation of cross-images. The importance of Sinhala and Tamil texts – frequently disregarded by Western scholars as insufficiently “accurate”, or for conveying myths and folk tales that “modernity” does not recognize as “real” historical evidence – is strongly emphasised in the book, thanks to the contributions of S. Pathmanathan and Rohini Paranavitana. Where the Portuguese texts are concerned, K. D. Paranavitana’s essay shows how the *tombos* (land and revenue registers) reflected the newcomers’ perception of the territory in its multiple (geographical, human and economic) dimensions. It also underlines the importance of such registers for the history of early modern Sri Lanka, all the more so because the *Estado da Índia* could not afford to exclude native collaborators and local conceptions from the process of preparing those registers. Rui Loureiro studies the importance of Ceylon in the work of the chronicler Diogo do Couto and discusses the origin of his materials, while the article co-authored by Jorge Flores and Maria Augusta Lima Cruz focuses on two obscure “Portuguese” Baroque dialogues from the 1630s, concerning Sri Lanka and the death of the prominent Captain-General Dom Constantino de Sá de Noronha.

“Religion: Conflict and Interaction” aims to do more than simply recount the successes and failures of the Christians on the island. The complex relations between Buddhism, Hinduism, Catholicism and Protestantism from the early 16th to the late 18th century are addressed by a group of scholars that have made substantial contributions to writing a new

history of conversion, religious interactions and missionary work. Alan Strathern and John Holt's studies are of the utmost importance for understanding the impact of Christianity on 16th-century Sri Lankan Buddhism, society and polity. The contributions by Jurrien van Goor and Ines Županov then address a later and even more puzzling period, during which the *Predikants* and the Oratorians came into play.

The third part, "Space and Heritage: Construction, Representation", is meant to underline the importance of cartography (Zoltán Biedermann), religious architecture (Helder Carita), and artistic objects (Nuno Vassallo e Silva) in the making of Portuguese-Sri Lankan history. Primarily an incursion into the field of visual culture, this section will hopefully offer a better understanding of the Portuguese colonial experience in Sri Lanka in its close relations to indigenous imprints and Western inputs.

Finally, "Language and Ethnicity, Identity and Memory" is concerned with the different aspects of the cultural and social life of Sri Lankan Creole communities of Portuguese/Eurasian origin. By researching the wide circulation of *Singelle Nona*, Kenneth David Jackson traces the extraordinary life of a Portuguese Burgher Song that, given its popularity in Sri Lanka, corresponds to "a literal embodiment of interconnectedness and mixed heritage in modern Asian societies". Dennis McGilvray's article closes the volume and provides a sharp, updated view of the situation of the Burgher communities from Batticaloa and Eastern Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the civil war and the tsunami.

With one exception, the essays in this book were presented as papers at the 2005 (December, 15-17) international conference "Portugal-Sri Lanka: 500 Years", hosted and sponsored by the Centre Culturel Calouste Gulbenkian (CCCCG), the delegation in Paris of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The papers have been thoroughly revised since their initial presentation and formatted according to given editorial guidelines, while accepting some flexibility regarding the citation of personal and place names.

I am particularly grateful to Emílio Rui Vilar, Chairman of the Calouste Gulbenkian, for his enthusiastic support to this project in its different stages: concept, conference, and book. I also want to thank all the staff of the CCCC – and in particular its director, João Pedro Garcia – for their hospitality and efficiency. The publication of *Re-exploring the Links* owes considerably to the professional commitment of Michael Langfeld, Director of Harrassowitz

Verlag, and Roderich Ptak (Munich University), founding editor of the 'Maritime Asia' series (formerly 'South China and Maritime Asia'). Robert Newcomb and Richard Trewinnard have done a splendid job in translating and/or revising the written English of the contributions authored by non-native speakers, while Luís Pinheiro carefully prepared the index. Finally, the editor wants to express his gratitude to all the institutions and private collectors that gave permission for the reproduction of the illustrations included in this volume.

Jorge Flores
Lisbon, September 2006